CORONET

Frame The Baron

John Creasey

as Anthony Morton

The Baron in no-man's-land: between murderous jewel-thieves and the police

16209 0

FRAME THE BARON

Mannering pushed vigorously against the door. It cracked against the bulky man's head, and sent him staggering backwards. As he went, Mannering went forward, pulled the door wide, and jumped at him, as his knife weaved useless circles. He tried desperately to regain his balance and to strike out, but he didn't have a chance. Mannering caught his wrist and twisted; the knife dropped, and the man squealed.
Mannering pushed him bodily across the room until he came up against the wall, and while he was still moving, bent down and picked up the knife.

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John Creasey
as
Anthony Morton

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1.	SANCTUARY?	7
2.	FEAR	15
3.	THREAT	23
4.	MORNING	31
5.	DECISION	39
6.	JOHN MANNERING	47
7.	PHOTOGRAPHS	56
8.	MAN WITH A KNIFE	65
9.	NEAR MISS	72
10.	LIE?	79
11.	WELCOME	87
12.	PROBLEMS	95
13.	SHOCK	102
14.	WHY?	111
15.	REASON?	120
16.	RUSH	126
17.	DISASTER	134
18.	PRESSURE	140
19.	ORDERS	150
20.	UNDERSTANDING	158
21.	SYD	168
22.	THE IMPERSONATION	175
23.	BRISTOW	185

1

SANCTUARY?

It was dark and very quiet in the room where Della Gill lay sleeping. It was dark and quiet everywhere nearby. This was an old house, of three storeys, hers a room and a tiny kitchen and bathroom at the top; ample for her needs. The house was one in a London borough, indistinguishable from a hundred others by night, with little to distinguish it by day. It was the end one of a terrace of eight; another terrace was on either side of this one.

A sound disturbed the quiet.

It disturbed the girl, too, and she stirred but did not wake. Her bed was behind the door, and by day there was a large screen round it so that it was almost possible to forget that this was bedroom and living-room in one.

The sound was repeated—a sharp tapping, at the door.

She stirred again.

For a moment there was silence, but not true silence now. The girl's breathing was audible, and so was the breathing of whoever tapped; it sounded like a man, panting. Then, as if from afar off, there was another sound, this time of a car engine. There was a second and a third, each drew nearer and grew louder, only to fade away again.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap.

It was a funny little sound, it carried a sense of urgency, and yet it was not loud enough to wake the girl. It continued for several minutes, then stopped again. This time, it was not repeated, but a different sound replaced it, as of someone scratching at the door. This went on and on for a long time, and Della Gill stirred again as if, subconsciously, she was aware of the sound and of the urgency and the fear

in whoever was outside, yet it was not strong enough to wake her.

Then, another car sounded outside—and cars were seldom heard in this long, narrow street at three o'clock in the morning; at this time Clibber Street, like most of London, was still and sleeping.

Like the girl.

. . . . .

On the other side of the door, a man crouched, listening, his head turned towards the staircase and the window which overlooked the side of the house next door. He could not see into the street, but he could hear that car engine and could see a faint glow of light where there had been darkness. He was no longer panting, but breathing almost as if he feared that the slight sound he made could be overheard.

The light grew brighter.

He clenched his teeth as he stared at it while it was reflected, just a pale glow, on the window, then it faded and the sound of the engine quietened and the car passed.

He relaxed, and leaned against the door, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. Now he breathed more deeply. Once he shivered, and the spasm lasted for a long time. It was an age before he turned towards the door again and began to use the small piece of wire, picking at the lock of the door.

He stopped, and tapped again, using his knuckles, and causing the tapping sound with a signet ring which he wore on his third finger. As he tapped, he whispered :

"*Della,* wake up, *Della!*"

There was no response, and the night was still and quiet again, while he leaned against the door and brushed his hand across his forehead, and looked as if he was terrified, although the darkness of the landing hid his face.

"*Della!*"

He held his breath for a moment, then suddenly he

gasped: "You've got to let me in!" and rapped on the door violently, making much more noise than he had before—so much noise that he snatched his hand away and stood back, as if awfully afraid that he had woken not only the girl but everyone else in the house, and that he was afraid of what that might lead to.

"Della, for God's sake wake up," he breathed.

. . . . .

She was awake.

At first it was not full wakefulness, just a gentle rising out of the full depths of sleep. She stirred again and felt a slight, reluctant movement at her eyes, but she was snug and warm and it was dark, and there was no need to wake. She did not know what had disturbed her, and did not hear the breathing of the youth on the other side of the door. Her eyes only quivered open, and turned towards the wall and she was already dropping back into sleep when the tapping started afresh; and although she had not really heard it before, she was aware of it. This was different from the sound which had disturbed her, too, a very light tapping; she tried to forget it. But suddenly, she became more acutely aware of it, and realised that it was close by. Her body stiffened. She raised her head a little from the pillow, and there was no doubt about the sound.

Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap.

It was at the door.

She turned over on her back, her eyes wide open, seeing nothing but a faint greyness as she lay motionless and alert. There it was, going on and on as if it would never stop.

It was coming from the door.

She felt scared.

She turned her head and looked towards the door, and as she did so, the sound stopped, but there was another which was unmistakable; a whispering. She did not know what the

words were, just knew that someone was speaking there in a hushed voice.

Then, the tapping came again.

She pushed the bedclothes back.

She stretched out a hand and put on the bedside light, and that brought a kind of comfort. Here were the familiar things of her room, her books, her pictures, the mirror, the photograph of Max, the radio, the couch. . . .

The tapping did not stop, and now she fancied that she could hear *Max,* breathing.

She slid her legs out of bed. It was chilly, but not really cold. She wore a suit of pale green pyjamas, and her dressing-gown lay over the foot of the bed. She picked it up as she reached her feet. The tapping had stopped altogether, but there was no doubt that someone was at the door, whispering her name.

It could only be Max.

But now——

The small clock on the bookcase showed that it was nearly half-past three.

She went to the door, released the safety catch. But after that there was no sound, and she wondered if she had been imagining it all, whether in fact Max was outside—then, edgily, whether it could be someone else. In that moment she was more frightened than she had been since waking, but she slid the knob of the lock back, and opened the door a fraction.

Then came Max's voice, whispering but quite unmistakable.

"Della, hurry, let me in."

She saw him standing a little way from the door, as she opened it and the light fell upon him. He was fully dressed. His fair hair looked ruffled and untidy. There was a tear in the collar of his jacket, and his tie was pulled round to one side and almost hidden by a point of his collar. He held his

left arm bent and hugged tightly to his body, as if he was hurt, and as the light fell fully upon him, the fear showed in his eyes.

"Max!"

"Quiet," he breathed. "*Quiet!*"

She stood aside, and he came in, still holding his left arm as if it hurt. He staggered. Instinctively she put a hand out to help him, but he gulped and muttered:

"Close the door, *quietly*."

She did so, and there was the faintest of clicks as it closed, followed by silence except for their breathing. She looked at him, almost horrified, for now she saw the bruises on his face, two ugly scratches under his chin, each bleeding, and the dust and dirt on his clothes.

"What . . ." she began. Then she saw his eyes close, and realised that he was on the point of collapse, and swaying again. "All right," she whispered, and took his arm and led him towards the couch; she had to help him to sit down. He had lost all his colour, and his pallor showed up the red of blood much more vividly. He hadn't moved his arm, but hugged it tight to his body, as if afraid of what would happen if he took it away.

She lifted his legs, so that he was reclining, then picked up a cushion from a chair and pushed it behind his back. His eyes were closed, and it looked as if he had fainted. She did not know what to do, yet told herself that he needed something to bring him round; to stimulate him. She had no idea what had happened, she had never seen him even remotely like this before; usually he was smiling and gay and immaculate, sometimes with an air of studied carelessness.

"Max——" she began, hoarsely.

She had a little whisky and a little brandy in the apartment. Brandy, that was what he needed. She hurried to a corner cupboard, opened it at the top, and took down a

small bottle of brandy, small enough to go into a handbag or a man's pocket. She unscrewed the cap with unsteady fingers, and then took a spoon from a small table, and poured brandy into it. In spite of the trembling, she did not spill any. She put the bottle down and took the spoon to Max. His head was a little to one side, and she moved it, so that it would be easy to put the brandy to his lips. He looked so pale, except for those crimson scratches, which were so ugly, that she was frightened in case he was dead.

Or dying.

Then, she hesitated, remembering that it was wrong to give liquids to anyone unconscious. She needed smelling-salts. But she moistened his lips with brandy, and after a moment the muscles of his cheeks and of his neck moved.

She drew back.

His left arm was not pressed so tightly against his body now, and she put the spoon down and began to move his arm very cautiously, fearful of what she might see.

She had cause to fear.

There was blood on the grey jacket and on the sleeve; Max was wounded in the side. She could not guess how badly, and did not know how much blood he had lost.

She drew back.

At the back of her mind there seemed to be a voice, whispering to her: "Don't panic." She hated the crimson scratches, but knew that they were not deep cuts; perhaps the wound in his side was not deep, either. Max seemed quite unaware of what she was doing as she opened his jacket, and saw the blood on the shirt and the top of the trousers. She did not stop because of it, but unfastened the top buttons of his trousers and pulled up his shirt cautiously —and saw the wound.

It did not look deep, although it had bled so much, but she couldn't be sure.

She heard herself saying: "I must get a doctor."

There was one at the corner of the street, a hundred yards away. But should she? Why had Max insisted on quiet? She answered herself, almost at once. He could have meant only one thing: he had come by stealth, as a man afraid, and would not want anyone else to see him here. If she sent for a doctor, then all this would have to be reported.

She turned away, in sudden decision.

She was surprised that she could behave so calmly, although she knew that it would not take much to break her calm. She went into the little bathroom, with a shower in one corner behind a plastic screen, and the first-aid cabinet, the hand-basin and the towels. She half filled a plastic bowl and added some liquid antiseptic; the smell was very strong. She took out some cotton-wool, then went back to the room. Max had not moved. She damped the cotton-wool with the solution and dabbed at the blood; it was not dry, but already a little tacky. When she had cleansed the wound as well as she could, she dipped another piece of cotton-wool in the water and began to wash the wound. Soon, she was able to see that it was quite small, and it looked as if he had been stabbed with a knife with a narrow blade. There was a little swelling and slight discoloration at the edge, that was all. She washed it again, then dabbed it dry very gently, and stood back, looking at Max.

He was breathing steadily, and she could not believe that he would do so if the wound was really serious.

Next, she washed the scratches under his chin.

At first they had seemed jagged, like the cuts one would get from a piece of wire or an old tin. Cleaned, they showed up thin and sharp, as if they had also been caused by a knife; neither of them was very deep, but the blood had stained the collar of his jacket and his shirt.

Who would he fight with, like this?

Had someone tried to kill him? To cut his throat?

Why had he come here, as if for sanctuary?

She turned away, not noticing that he stirred. She went into the kitchen and rinsed out the towel and watched the red water running down the sink, swilled the bowl out, and then refilled it and took some gauze. She had no large bandages here, but she could cut a linen towel into strips.

Then she went into the big room.

"Max!" she cried, and sprang towards him, slopping the water over the edge of the bowl. "Sit down!"

There he was, trying to get off the couch, and staring at the window. But he hadn't the strength to get to his feet, and the wound in his side was beginning to bleed again.

"Max!" Della banged the bowl down on to a table, dropped the other things, and ran towards him. "What on earth —"

"Draw draw the curtains," he muttered. "Quick." Then he collapsed again, but seemed unable to look anywhere except at the window. "Draw curtains."

She didn't ask why, for at heart she knew. She went swiftly to the window and drew the curtains, and as she did so, heard a new sound a staccato kind of sound, like that of a motor-cycle engine.

She turned towards Max, and saw that it terrified him.

2

FEAR

THE sound of the engine seemed to be at the far end of the street, but it was coming nearer. And with it, Max seemed to find some reserve of strength, for he twisted round and placed his right hand against the head of the couch, his left over the stab wound; and he forced himself to his feet. He was gritting his teeth, and losing the little colour that he had.

"Max, lie back, or . . ."

"Must get out of here," he gasped. "That that's them. They use—motor bikes. Must . . ." He didn't finish, but stared towards the kitchen-door, and took a step towards it. "Fire escape," he said. "I'll go down there."

"You can't!"

"Must," he said, and his voice grew stronger. "Della, you clean everything up. Everything! Hurry. Get back to bed. When they come . . ."

"*But who's coming?*"

"They'll—kill me," he said, and whether it was true or not, obviously he believed it. "Pretend you're asleep. Say you've you've heard nothing."

The motor-cycle engine was much nearer, and the beat slower, as if the rider had slowed down, perhaps to look for the number of a house, perhaps to look for this particular house. Max moved slowly towards the kitchen-door. There was really no choice for Della; the stark fear in Max chose for her. She picked up the bowl, and saw where some of the water had slopped on to the carpet, making a dark patch. She picked up a towel, and hurried towards the kitchen, getting there before Max. It overlooked the back of the

house, so there was no fear of light being seen from here. There was a door, which she seldom opened, leading to a fire escape and down to the concrete back-yards behind this group of houses. She and Max had climbed down it one day as much for fun as for any reason.

She opened the door.

"Careful with light!" he gasped.

"They can't see . . ."

Max was at the doorway, and he put the light out, gasping as he moved his arm to do so. He was breathing very heavily, as if in pain. The only light now came from the big room, but it was enough, and she moved quickly, and put an arm round him.

"Clear everything up," he urged. "I'm—I'm all right."

He looked as if he would collapse before he reached the fire escape, but somehow kept on his feet. Della went hurrying, and bent down, scrubbing the damp patch with a towel, wiping off damp marks on a table, punching the cushion into shape, looking to see if there was anything which betrayed the fact that Max had been here.

She noticed nothing.

She ran back to the kitchen, and saw the door close. It gave a sharp click. Then she heard a faint sound, as he stepped on to the iron of the fire escape. She did not believe that he could keep his balance, and if he fell —

She made herself stop thinking of that.

His fear had been so great; fear of that motor-cycle —

It had stopped.

Della had not noticed that, she had rushed about so much. But undoubtedly it had stopped and there was only silence. She put the bowl and the oddments in a cupboard underneath the little sink, then hurried back into the big room, where the bed-clothes were turned down, just as she had left them. She could not control a fit of shivering as she

looked round almost desperately, to make sure that she had left nothing which would betray Max's visit.

The brandy!

There it was, on top of a bookcase, with a screw cap standing by the side of it, next to the spoon. She ran across, snatched up the spoon and the cap, and then made herself act slowly as she put the cap on; there was a faint smell of brandy, she wondered if that would still be there when——

Why *should* a man come here?

That motor cycle's silence seemed ominous, but it was possible that it had been driven right past, that there was really nothing to fear; and yet Max's fear had been an awful thing. She could see his face almost as if he was still here in the room.

She had to get into bed, to pretend to be asleep, there wasn't a moment to lose. She sprang to the bed, pushed the brandy bottle and the spoon under the bed-clothes, down as far as the foot, then got into bed. When she switched off the light, the darkness was frightening. She slid down, shivering again, and lay on her back, telling herself over and over again that Max could be wrong, that he *must* be wrong, that no one would come here.

Was he all right?

If he fell . . .

She heard a sound at the door.

. . . . . .

It was like the sound which she had heard once before, not a tapping, just a scratching. It was very faint. She had heard nothing until then, no footsteps, nothing to suggest that anyone was near, but this sound was very clear, there was no possibility of mistake.

She felt herself fighting for breath.

If—if a man came in, if he heard her breathing like this, he would know that she had been awake. She must keep quiet. She drew a deep breath, and held it for a moment,

and felt her heart thumping, felt as if she would not be able to breathe again. She breathed out slowly. The scratching sound continued, and she felt quite sure that a man was trying to pick the lock.

Quiet.

Her breathing was steadier.

She turned to face the wall, so that her back was towards the door. When she rested her head on the pillow she could not hear the faint sound, and abruptly she raised her head, so as to hear everything. It was still there, it seemed to have been there for an age.

It——

It stopped.

She held her breath.

Then there came another sound, a slight squeaking; and she knew that the door was being opened. It always squeaked.

She dropped her head on to the pillow again, and closed her eyes tightly—and then opened them again; she could not bear to be both deafened and blinded. The creaking stopped. She heard a sound, as of a footfall, and it was repeated; next moment the creaking came again, and she knew that the door was being closed. She closed her eyes tightly, but knew that the lids were twitching, if anyone came close and looked at her they would know that she wasn't asleep.

The door lock clicked.

She opened her eyes a fraction, on to darkness, but a moment later there came light. Whoever was here had switched on a torch. She saw its beam swivelling round, reflecting in the mirror and casting a glow on the walls. It seemed to be coming closer to her. She saw its hard brightness, saw it strike the edge of her pillow, and then knew that it shone upon her own head. She could not relax, and just lay there motionless and stiff with fear.

She could hear the intruder's breathing.

Then the light moved.

She did not know what the man was doing, and dared not turn round or stir. She could only pray that he would go away when he knew that Max was not here.

Had she left anything out, to give his visit away?

She tried desperately to think. There might be smears of blood somewhere, that was all; Max had taken nothing off, and she had taken nothing away from him. *Had she?* She heard a stealthy movement and believed that the man was moving away from her. When she dared to open her eyes a fraction she saw the reflection of the torch light in the mirror and the shape of the man.

He was close to the kitchen-door.

He opened the door, which did not squeak, but she remembered how she had moved about the kitchen, emptying the blood-stained water; a little might have spilt, and some might show pink on the white porcelain of the sink. Had she flushed the toilet, to take the bloodied cotton-wool away.

Had she?

He went inside.

In a frenzy of terror Della tried to think of anything else that he might find, but thought of none until, quite noticeably, she felt a cold draught. It hadn't been there before, although now it cut about her face and shoulders, and stirred her hair. Why? What had happened to cause the draught?

The man must have opened the fire-escape door.

That was it; that was it beyond all doubt.

She still didn't move, still felt that she dare not, but she could have screamed; suddenly, she realised that she was biting her lips. She could picture the scene: the man at the top of the fire escape, and Max—where was Max? Halfway down? Part of the way down? Or in the yard, out of

sight? He couldn't get far in his condition, and if the man went down those iron steps, Max would be caught.

Della thought that she heard the clang of the iron, and the draught still swept about her face. She couldn't stand this any longer, she had to turn round, and would have to go after the man if he went down those stairs.

She opened her eyes, and was about to turn round when she became aware of light again. Had the man stayed in the kitchen? As suddenly as it had swept about her, the draught stopped, which meant that he had closed the door. So he hadn't gone down after Max.

He was coming in here, now.

Would he just leave? She prayed that he would, that he would feel sure that Max hadn't been here and would go and drive away. Once she heard the sound of the motor-cycle, there would be no need for fear. Max would hear it too, and would lose his terror. It wouldn't be long, now.

Through her lashes she saw the light reflected in the mirror and swivelling round slowly, as if the intruder was trying to take in everything—every piece of furniture, every ornament, *every*thing. He was breathing more naturally, as if he also felt an easing of the tension.

Please God, make him go.

She heard another rustle of movement, and then the light turned towards her, and she closed her eyes tightly. Yet she was still aware of light; it seemed to be shining straight on to her eyes, but it could not be, because her back was towards him.

Was he leaning forward?

Was he . . .

She felt movement on the sheet. She flinched. Then his hand moved swiftly, she opened her mouth and a scream began, but the flat of the man's hand choked it. He pressed it tightly against her mouth, so that for a moment she could not breathe. But she could struggle. She flung her arm up-

wards, trying to strike at him, clawed at his hand with her left arm, and tried to pull it away, but the pressure was too strong. Suddenly he gripped her right wrist and twisted her arm so sharply that pain went through her like a streak of fire.

"Keep still," he ordered roughly.

She made another ineffectual effort to pluck his hand from her mouth, but he was holding her other arm so that she couldn't move at all without adding to the pain. She stopped trying. There was great panic in her, and yet she could breathe through her nose. She could see, too. The man had put the torch on the foot of the bed, where it shone upon her face; that was how he managed to have both hands free.

"Don't scream and don't make any noise, or I'll choke the life out of you."

He had a rough voice, in spite of the fact that she could only just hear the words; and he twisted her arm a little more, as if to make sure that she knew that he meant what he said.

"Understand? No noise."

She tried to shake her head, and then stopped abruptly, as if fearful that he would think she was trying to struggle again. But he didn't seem to think that. He eased his hand away from her mouth, and now she could breathe more freely. She took in great gulps of air while twisting her head round to look at him. She saw his eyes, reflecting the torch light. He wore a dark cloth cap pulled low over his forehead, and a scarf or handkerchief over the lower half of his face. The eyes glittering in the bright light, made her even more frightened.

"Turn round," he ordered.

She obeyed at once, wriggling round until she lay on her back. He looked down at her. She hated the expression in his eyes. But he drew back a little and leaned towards the foot of the bed and picked up the torch.

For a moment its light was painful on her eyes.

The man switched on the bedside light, and put the torch out. This light, dimmer and farther away, was more restful, and helped to ease her panic. She stared up at his bright little eyes, while the man stood by the side of the bed, and she realised that he was a small man; small and lean, but with those powerful hands.

"Your brother Max been here?" he demanded, in the same low-pitched, harsh voice.

She drew a deep breath, then tried to frame words, but it was not easy, and she stammered, saying *mmmmmmmmmm* before she managed to gasp :

"M-Max? He he doesn't live . . ."

"I know where he lives, and he won't be going back there for a while," the man said. "I'm asking you if he's been here. *Tonight*," he added, and his voice became a little louder and he raised his hands, the fingers crooked, and stood very close to her. "If you lie to me, I'll choke the life out of you. I'll find out if he's been here, too, so *don't* lie."

His hands were only a foot away from her, crooked so that they could close about her neck.

"*Has he been here?*" he repeated, and he looked as if he was ready to kill.

3

THREAT

"He—he was here last week," Della Gill said huskily. "That's the last time I saw him, he was here. . . ."

The man moved suddenly and swiftly, and slapped her sharply across the face.

"Don't lie to me. He's been here tonight!"

"He hasn't," she gasped, "not since last week, Tuesday, he usually comes Tuesdays if he comes, he didn't come tonight."

She couldn't go on.

She could not tell whether the man believed her or not. She felt that if he stood over her any longer she would have to scream or else she would faint. Those eyes, the way his nose jutted against the scarf now she knew that it was a thin woollen scarf the way his fingers crooked, all held her at screaming point.

Then he began to look about the room.

He did not move away from her, but his arms had dropped to his sides, and there no danger of immediate attack. If she had left the brandy bottle there, he would have seen it. As it was he might notice the smell, or he might notice the damp patches on the carpet, or anything which she hadn't noticed. The cushions on the couch perhaps; had they been stained with blood? She hadn't thought to look.

The man moved towards the foot of the bed, and turned to face her. He had broader shoulders than she had realised, she had an impression of great physical strength. The way he stood, almost directly beneath the light, threw his thin-lapped figure into sharp relief.

"Listen, Della Gill," he said roughly. "I want your brother, see? I want to talk to him, and I'm not the only one. If he telephones you . . ."

He started, as if that was a new idea, and looked towards the telephone, which was on the bedside table. He took a step forward, and his voice became very harsh :

"He telephoned tonight?"

"No!"

"Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying."

"He telephoned?"

"He didn't!"

"If you lie——"

"I'm not lying," she gasped. "I'm not lying, he hasn't telephoned, I swear he hasn't. Go—go away. I can't stand it any longer, go away, or I'll scream, I'll *scream*!"

"You keep your mouth shut," the man said. He was closer to her again, and looked as menacing as ever. "Just listen to me. If he comes here or if he telephones, tell him to get in touch with Syd. Understand? He's to get in touch with Syd."

"I—I I'll tell him."

"You'd better tell him," the man rasped, "because we'll watch the house, and we'll know whether he comes. What are you going to tell him?"

"He's he's to get in touch with Syd!"

"That's right, you've heard me," the man said. He moved towards her again, and his left hand fell upon the telephone while his right seemed to hover only a foot or so above her. "You wouldn't get ideas the way that your brother does, would you? You wouldn't get any idea such as telephoning for the police as soon as I've gone."

"No, I won't! Just go away, I won't —"

He moved his right hand and his fingers intertwined in her hair; he pulled it taut—not really painfully but so taut

that if he jerked, it would be very painful. He still had a hand on the shiny black telephone.

"That's right, you won't," he said softly. "Because if you called the police they would want to know where Max was tonight, wouldn't they? And if they started looking for Max it wouldn't be so good for him, he would find himself in a lot of trouble. He might even find himself in dock on a charge of murder, see. How does *that* sound?"

She could only lie there, feeling the tautness of her hair, knowing that the man could strike her or kill her.

He let her go.

"Just give him that message, and keep away from the police," he said. "Your brother's in quite enough trouble without that."

"I—I—I'll tell him."

"I believe you will," the man sneered, "but don't lose any time."

At last he backed away, opened the door, and went out. His movements were so quick that it was hard to believe that he had really gone. He left the light on—and Della lay breathing very hard and still desperately frightened too frightened to begin to think about some of the things that he had said. She kept hearing his voice, as if he was still in the room; and she seemed to be answering :

"Get in touch with Syd, get in touch with *Syd Syd, Syd.*"

But, he'd gone, and there was silence everywhere —silence up here, at all events, and Max somewhere outside, cold, injured, bleeding if he bled too much he might die.

Syd, Syd, Syd.

For those few moments, she was paralysed as with fear, and lay staring at the light and at the ceiling, picturing the man's figure, and his little bright eyes. Then something seemed to be released in her, and she flung the bed-clothes back and swung her legs out of bed. She kicked against something hard, and a spoon fell out of the bed and

dropped on to the carpet, without a sound. The spoon and the brandy: if the masked man had seen either he would probably have guessed the truth.

Now she was frantic.

She pulled at the bed with all her strength, so as to get it in front of the door, and to make sure that the man would not get in again. Then she grabbed her dressing-gown, pushed her feet into her slippers, and ran towards the kitchen. The man had left the door open. She put a hand to the light switch, then remembered Max's terror of the light, and pulled her hand away.

"Max," she said brokenly. "Oh, Max."

She went to the other door, but didn't open it at first. She felt very cold, and was shivering. The word "murder" kept coming into her mind, but it didn't make real sense yet, she couldn't really think, could only feel. Yet her mind was working logically. If she went downstairs too quickly, the man might see her, for he might still be watching. If he'd really believed that Max had been here, he might think he would soon come. Did that make sense? The man had expected Max, perhaps thought that Max was on his way; surely if he thought that, he would wait. She listened for the sound of the motor cycle, but heard only her own breathing. As she stood by the kitchen-door, peering at the faint grey shape of the window, a sound came from the flat downstairs: the striking of a clock.

". . . three, four."

There was no staccato beat of the motor cycle, but the man had had ample time to get downstairs; if he meant to go away at once he would surely have started the engine by now.

Was he going to wait?

Would he look at the back and side of the house?

She couldn't wait for the sound of the motor-cycle engine any longer, she had to go and find Max. But there was no

need to put on the light. She reached the door, and opened it and doing so, she realised that she had not locked it, the intruder must have wondered why it was unlocked.

Had he?

He hadn't asked .

It didn't matter!

She stepped out on to the iron platform. On it was a thin rubber mat which deadened sound, but once anyone stepped off the mat on to the iron it clanged noisily, and could be heard a long way off, especially in the silence. She could make out the shapes of the windows of other houses, of the roofs, of the actual fire escape, which looked dark against the pale grey of the concrete yard. She heard nothing, and had almost given up hoping that the motor-cycle engine would start up.

Then she heard a sound, of a footfall. Suddenly a dark figure appeared from the entrance to the little service alley which led to the courtyard; a man was going towards the place where Max might be hiding.

If he glanced up here, he might see her.

She pressed tightly back against the door. There was no light up here, and she told herself that there was no danger of being seen; but she could not go to Max's help, because once she started down the ladder there would be such clanging and clattering.

Would the man find Max?

He was lost in the darkness by the side of the houses, and she could just hear him walking about. No other sound came yet. No sound of voices, no exclamation, no scuffle. If he found Max, would Max be able to help himself, would he be able to fight?

There was just silence.

Then, the footsteps came again, the man appeared for a moment before he walked into the little alley again. He hadn't found his quarry.

So—where *was* Max?

Still she did not dare to go down the fire escape, because of the noise, and a new fear came to her. Even if Max had managed to keep out of sight, he would have to come here again and would have to climb the escape. He would make as much noise as she would, might even make more, because he was wearing shoes. So the other man would hear it in this quiet, there was no shadow of doubt about that.

She heard another sound—a tapping, like that which had first come against the landing door. She spun round, frightened out of her wits. It came again, very softly. Then in a wild burst of relief she realised that it was Max, he had been aware of the danger, too, and had come up the main stairs.

It didn't matter how he had managed to hide from the other man, he had; this *must* be Max.

She hurried into the big room.

The bed, tight against the door, seemed heavier now, and as she pushed at it she called in a piercing whisper:

"*Who is it?*"

"Max," came the reply in a voice she could just hear. "It's Max."

It must be.

It *might* be.

Her first thought had been that it would be him, but now she was flooded with doubts. It might be the other man, pretending.

There was only one way to find out.

She pushed the bed away at last, opened the door an inch, and whispered:

"Who is that?"

"It's—it's me," Max gasped, and now she recognised his voice. "Let—let me in."

He almost fell against her as she opened the door wider, and would have fallen if she had not supported him. She

could just make out the pale blur of his face and hands. He didn't speak again, but seemed to have collapsed, and this time she helped him on to the bed, which was nearer than the couch, and stood back. As she stared down through the darkness, she wondered whether she dare put a light on, wondered what would happen, if the other man came back.

She could keep him out, this time.

She pushed the bed again. With Max on it, it was even heavier, but once it was in front of the door that would be a good thing not bad. She went into the kitchen and locked the outer door, and moved back towards the big room, but before she reached it, her knees gave way, she turned giddy, and felt herself falling. She stretched out both hands and touched the wall, and would have fallen but for its support. Her head seemed to be going round and round, it was a great effort to lean against the wall without sliding down. She did not know how long she was like that, but at last she was able to move again. She went very slowly across the little room to a wooden chair, and lowered herself into it. She began to shiver, and the fit became uncontrollable. It was useless to tell herself that it was silly, that she must pull herself together, that there was no longer any danger. She was like a jelly, and could hear her teeth chattering and yet do nothing to stop them.

Gradually, she steadied.

"M-m-m-must get a h-h-h-hot drink," she muttered, and very carefully she moved about the kitchen, putting on a kettle, getting out tea-things. She wasn't quite herself, and felt very weak, but she did not think that there was any need to fear another attack of giddiness.

She went into the big room; and as she did so, as she saw Max lying there, so pale and lifeless looking, she cried hoarsely:

"*Max*," and tried to hurry towards him.

She should not have hurried. Her head swam again,

and this time there was nothing to stop her from falling. She knew that she was going, but could not save herself, and she crumpled up. But she did not lose consciousness entirely. She was aware of light, of the bed, of the carpet, of Max's head hanging down limply, and knew that she ought to look at the wound again. Max might have killed himself by leaving the flat, and yet she could not gain control over her limbs for a long time.

Then she heard a voice.

The room seemed to be in a haze, then, and she did not understand anything, except the fact that someone was calling her name. Della, Della, Della. Dell. *Dell!* There was a kind of desperation in that tone, and it brought her out of the swimmy helplessness, and she raised her head and saw Max. He was leaning on his elbow, looking at her and calling desperately.

There was another sound, too.

The kettle was boiling.

4

MORNING

DELLA was not sure how long afterwards it was, but soon she was on her feet, telling Max to stay where he was, and examining the stab wound. It had bled a little but not much more, and he was still breathing fairly normally, so she did not think that it was really serious. She made tea and brought it in, put it on the bedside table, and pulled up a chair. She did everything slowly and cautiously, afraid of losing her balance again, and when she sat down she put a lot of sugar in the tea and stirred vigorously. She handed Max a cup, as he sat propped up on his pillows.

He had watched her every movement.

"Drink it while it's hot," she said, and began to sip hers.

He made a funny little choking sound, then began to obey. She watched him without realising how much she was staring. She was very tired, and occasionally she still felt shivery. She was also fighting against facing the inevitable need to ask what the masked man had meant by talk of murder.

Max now had a little colour. The cuts underneath his chin were on the other side from her, and although there was a graze on his cheekbone, he did not look as if he was hurt, from here. He was almost startlingly good-looking—a fact which only occasionally dawned on her; it did now. She knew that he was a ladies' man, that few girls could resist him. Even now that was understandable—the way his hair curled, the funny little twitching smile at his lips; everything. Max had the good looks of the family.

He was twenty-seven and she was twenty-five, yet there were times when she felt old enough to be his mother, not

his sister. There had been a time when she had worried about him, but lately she had felt that there was no need, because he had seemed so successful and prosperous. He had an air of prosperity. She didn't quite know what he did for a living, whenever she taxed him he laughed and said that he was a little of everything, mostly a commission agent.

"I buy cheap and sell at a profit," he had told her. "If I know that Mr. A is looking for something that Mr. B has I bring them together, and get a commission. If I know that Mr. C has something he must sell in a hurry, to make a penny, I buy it and wait until I find Mr. D, and sell to make my penny. It's as simple as that, Della, and I do all right."

Now he was sitting up in her bed, wounded; and until a little while ago, he had been desperately frightened.

She finished her tea, and put her cup down.

"Della," he said, "have you heard that motor-bike go?"

"No," Della said, "but -but I might not have heard it."

He didn't make any comment, but gulped down the rest of his tea and said:

"Get me a cigarette, will you? There's one in my pocket."

"I have some." She didn't smoke much, but would welcome a cigarette now. When she got up for the matches and the cigarettes, her head felt quite steady. They lit up, and she sat down again and poured out more tea.

Max watched her very closely. He was looking much better, and she didn't want to start asking questions, she wanted him to start explaining; it was obvious that he didn't know how. He had half-smoked the cigarette, and she was feeling that she couldn't wait any longer, when he said slowly:

"What did he say?"

"You—*knew* he was here?"

"I knew he'd come."

"He—he said you were to get in touch with someone named Syd."

"I can imagine that," said Max. "That all?"

"He——"

"Dell, let me have it straight," Max said. "I can take it. I'm more myself now, thanks to Della Gill."

"He said something about being in dock on a charge of murder."

She wondered how Max would react when she brought that out, and was almost disappointed at the reaction. His lips tightened a little, and his eyes narrowed, but that was all. He didn't look or sound surprised or even greatly frightened; in fact, his voice was very steady and quiet.

"Is that everything?"

"It's enough, Max, surely!"

"Oh, it's enough," he agreed, "it's more than enough, but it isn't as much as it might have been. Didn't he say anything else?"

"He said they'd watch the house."

He nodded, was quiet for a moment, and then went on:

"Della, there are a lot of things you ought to know. I did a crazy thing. At least you'll think it was crazy. I joined him and two other men in a burglary."

Della kept silent and very still.

She realised that she had suspected something like this from the moment she had begun to think, but it sounded so cold and callous. He had joined a gang of burglars. Max. Laughing, happy-go-lucky, I-can-look-after-myself Max had become a criminal. And he seemed to speak without any sense of guilt or of shame. She wondered what other criminal things he had done, and how long he had lived a life of crime.

She reminded herself that this was her own brother; that there was talk of murder; and that the house was being watched.

"Nothing to say?" Max asked abruptly.

"Not until I've heard everything," she said quietly.

"All right. We burgled a jeweller's shop last night. It should have been easy. The jeweller was—well, it was really a pawn shop. He was a fence. Know what a fence is?"

She felt icy cold.

"Yes."

"Everything was laid on perfectly," Max told her in that same matter-of-fact voice, "and we didn't see how anything could go wrong. Only one thing did. We woke old Snowy——"

"Is that the pawnbroker?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes, for she sensed what was coming, and in one way she wished that Max needn't tell her, wished that she need never know. But he told her. . . . "Snowy" had come down from his flat above his shop, had tried to stop them, had actually reached the telephone, and:

"Syd drew a knife," Max said.

"Syd?"

"I didn't know he carried one," Max went on, and there seemed to be a different note in his voice, one almost of pleading, of begging to be believed. "He drew it on Snowy, though, and I—I tried to stop him. We had a hell of a fight."

Please, his eyes pleaded, *believe me*.

Della made herself speak.

"Couldn't you stop him?"

"No, Della I couldn't. You can see what he did to me."

There were the wounds, proof at least that he had been involved in a fight. Why shouldn't she believe all he said? She saw the pleading in his eyes and wished there was some way in which she could comfort him, but she felt so cold, her heart heavy within her, and she found it hard to meet his eye all the time—as if she, not Max, was guilty of some crime.

"What—what happened to—to Snowy?"

Max said slowly: "Syd killed him, Della; I couldn't stop him, I just couldn't!"

After a pause, she began:

"What——" and then stopped. There was little she could say.

"Syd killed him," Max repeated almost savagely, "after I'd done my damnedest to stop Syd. You –you've seen the result."

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly.

"Listen, Della," Max raised his voice and leaned forward, although it must have hurt him. "Della, listen to me! I wasn't prepared to take part in any violence. Syd and I were alone in the shop, and when Syd showed the knife I was astounded. That's gospel truth. I thought he was going to kill *me*." He broke off, and his arm seemed to press more tightly against the wound in his side. "Well, he didn't. Even when I was hurt I got my hands round his throat and nearly choked the life out of him, but it was too late to save old Snowy."

That made Della think of the masked man standing close to her with his fingers crooked, as if ready to strangle her.

"What—what happened then, Max?" she made herself ask.

"I –I got away," Max said, and now he looked past her, as if there was something to come which he didn't like saying. "There were just the two of us inside the shop, and one man on guard at the back, another at the front. I managed to dodge Syd, and then got out the back way. The guard wasn't wasn't expecting anyone to creep out from the shop. My car wasn't far away. I felt like hell, but I reached it and drove near here, and——"

"Is the car *here*?" Della exclaimed.

"Give me credit for having some sense," Max said almost sharply. "I drove it as far as the Broadway, and parked it there and walked the rest."

Fulham Broadway was nearly half a mile from here, and she could picture him walking—staggering—with those wounds; she could imagine how fearful he had been every time he had seen a policeman, or heard one walking by. The marvel was that he had walked so far, and had any strength left.

"I thought they wouldn't be long coming after me," he said. "But I had to come somewhere. I -I hoped they wouldn't come straight here. They must have sent one man here and one to my flat."

"Who was the man?"

"The man who came here is named Archy," Max told her. "I was hiding in a doorway just along the street when he came out downstairs. Archy thinks he's tough, but oh, well, that doesn't matter. He was one of the guards. I expect he and the one at the front wondered what was keeping us so long, and went to find out. Or else Syd recovered "

It didn't matter how the other men had discovered what had happened, the important thing was that they had come straight here, suspecting that he would come. Della tried to picture the scene, and prayed that Max had told her the truth. That he had fought against Syd to try to stop Syd from killing this Snowy, that he hadn't known about the knife.

"*Old* Snowy!" Did that mean that the man had been really old?

He was dead.

"Listen, Dell," Max said and stretched out his right hand as if he wanted to touch her for reassurance, "I'm telling you the whole truth, don't you understand? I wouldn't have got mixed up in this if I'd thought that Syd was going to kill the old man."

Della said: "I suppose not."

"Of course I wouldn't!"

"Max," Della said, and stood up slowly, she couldn't just

sit there any longer. "You didn't mind getting mixed up in a burglary, did you?"

"I——"

"*Did* you?"

He didn't answer.

"Max," she repeated, as if it helped to keep uttering his name, "how often have you been out like this?"

There was a long pause, before he answered:

"Not often."

That meant that it wasn't the first time.

She had sensed that from the time he had told her what had happened. This "agent" business, this buying cheap and selling high, or working on commission, had been a story to satisfy her, to stop her from worrying and trying to interfere.

She felt icy cold again as she moved about the room, and found herself touching little ornaments, as if they gave her some comfort. Every now and again she looked at Max. He didn't try to get off the bed, yet he looked much better, there was quite a colour in his cheeks. There was some boldness, too.

"Della," he said quietly. "It's no use pretending with you. If I told you this was the first time you wouldn't believe me, and you'd worry at it until you found out the truth. So I've told you all the truth. Syd killed the old man, but it's going to be damned difficult to make the police understand the truth. Syd will swear black's white, to put the blame on me. He and I were the only two people in the shop, but Archy or anyone else who works for Syd will swear that he was there too, they'll swear that I killed the old man. But I don't think they'll do anything yet, they'll lie low and hope the police won't discover who did the job."

"Did the job" sounded so like thieves' slang, and came so casually that Della realised that it was a phrase often on his lips.

"What -what do you want me to do?" Della asked.

"I just want to rest here for a few days, until I'm perfectly fit again," he said earnestly. "Just let me stay here. You can bring a bit of extra food can't you, but not enough to look suspicious if Syd keeps up the watch on the house, and I won't be any trouble. We can make a bed on the couch, and—well, it'll only be for a few days, Dell; I'll go as soon as I'm able to move about freely."

After a while, she asked:

"Where will you go to?"

"What the blazes does that matter, once I can look after myself I'll be all right. Della, don't look at me like that! I *am* your brother, I've told you I tried to stop the murder, I wouldn't have touched the job if I'd dreamt that Syd was ready to kill. I was a fool to get mixed up with Syd, but——"

He went on talking, and Della didn't really hear what he said. It didn't seem to matter. He had "been a fool" to get mixed up with Syd but that didn't mean that he thought he had been a fool to get mixed up with burglary. She understood a great deal about him. The way he had changed, the fact that he had so much money to spend, the fact that he visited her only once a month, sometimes even less; the fact that she wondered what had made him seem so hard and cynical.

She didn't have to wonder now.

And he was asking her to give him shelter, to hide him not only from this Syd, but also from the police.

5

DECISION

"Della," Max said, and there was a fresh note of urgency in his voice, almost a return to fear, "why don't you answer me? You will let me stay, won't you?"

She was standing at the foot of the bed, where the man Archy had stood for several minutes, keeping her in such fear. She almost preferred that dread to the distress that she felt now. The worst thing was the fact that Max took it so much for granted that she would help, that there was no question of going to the police. He was quite hardened. She tried to tell herself, even while she looked at him, that it was understandable, that he was in great danger and had no one else to turn to, but he took his own part in the crime for granted; that was the thing which hurt her most.

"For God's sake say something!" he rasped.

"I I've got to think about it," Della said. "It is such a shock. Max, I I hardly know what to think, I—I was so frightened when that man "

"Oh, what a fool I am!" Max exclaimed, and his expression changed, he became much more like the Max of years ago. "You've had a hell of a night, and all I can think about is my own skin. Listen, Sis! Help me off this bed, I'll use the couch, and when we've had some rest, you won't need telling what to do! Come on, lend me a hand."

"You'd better stay there," Della said. "I'll do something for that wound. I——"

"I tell you I'll take the couch," Max insisted, and moved as if he intended to get off the bed without help. "There's no reason why I shouldn't."

"You'll stay on that bed and do what you're told," Della

snapped. "You've been a big enough fool for one night, now try to come to your senses."

He gaped.

"I'll put a better pad on that wound," Della said more quietly. "I don't think it's very serious. Then we'd better try to get some sleep."

. . . . .

The oddly unexpected thing was that she did drop off. She heard half-past five strike, but the next thing she knew it was after eight o'clock, the room was bright with daylight, and she blinked about her, not remembering what had happened at first, and wondering why her head felt so uncomfortable and there was a crick in her neck. Then she glanced round and saw Max with his back towards her, his body in an attitude of complete repose.

She got up slowly, feeling very stiff, but Max did not stir. She was very thirsty. She went into the kitchen, still without disturbing him. By the time she had put a kettle on for tea, she had faced all the facts, including the one which mattered most; she had to make a decision. She hadn't long in which to make it, either.

She would be late for the office, but that wouldn't matter for once. Forget the office. Remember just the one fact, that she had to decide whether to let Max hide here, or whether to go to the police. If she went there, she would be betraying him, there was obviously a risk that he would be found guilty of the murder. At least, he might be found guilty of complicity. Even if no murder was involved, she would be hiding a thief.

Max . . .

She said sharply to herself: "It's no use getting emotional, you've got to keep your head."

By the time she had washed, the kettle was boiling. Max was still asleep although it was nearly nine o'clock. She made herself some toast and ate it, surprised that she felt

quite hungry, and as she sipped her tea wrestled with the problem. Realising that only one thing was certain: she could not give Max away in cold blood.

She went back into the big room, and was able to finish dressing without disturbing him. She made up as usual, it was better to try to behave normally. The other problems involved became apparent. If Max wanted his wound to heal quickly he shouldn't move about much, and she was usually out from half-past eight until seven in the evening. She would have to get his breakfast and leave something cold for him during the day.

She ought to ring the office, and say that she would be late.

Dialling the number, she heard Max catch his breath, then saw him stiffen. She watched him. He started to turn quickly, winced, and held his side. Then he edged round so that he was on his back, and could see her—and she had never realised that terror could affect a man so much.

"Dell, you're not calling——"

He thought she was telephoning the police.

"No," Della said, "I'm calling the office to say I'll be late. I mustn't be very late, though, I'll have to behave as if everything is normal."

He closed his eyes and lay on his back, as if he was recovering from a severe shock. She watched him quite dispassionately. The operator at the office answered and took her message; that was soon over. By then Max was opening his eyes and looking at her, and there was a quirk of a smile at his lips.

"Thanks, Della," he said, huskily. "I'll always be grateful."

"At least I won't tell the police until you've had a chance to get away," Della said, "but I can't make any other promise, Max. I feel quite numbed." That was quite true; numbed and shocked and badly shaken. "Are you hungry?"

"Never was one for breakfast," Max said, in a humble voice, and he looked away from her. "Cup of tea and a bit of toast will do fine for me—I won't be any trouble." As she moved towards the kitchen he went on: "Just put the radio near me, I'll have it tuned very low, and perhaps a jug of water, a spot of milk if you've got it, and I'll be quite happy to stay here all day. Last -last night took it out of me."

"Of course it did."

"Della, I——"

"Max," Della said very quietly, "I just don't know what to think, and I hardly know how I feel. I've told you I won't go to the police without warning you, but I've got to have time to think before deciding anything else. We needn't talk about it yet."

"No, I know," he said. "I'm an utter swine, but "

He didn't finish.

She made him the tea and toast, sponged his hands and face with cold water, and let him dry himself on a small towel. He seemed much more stiff than the night before but the wound had bled very little. She did not like the idea of leaving him, she could not stay there much longer. In any case, she needed to get some food in; to make sure that he didn't go hungry.

How long could she let him stay there?

How long could she square it with her conscience to stay away from the police?

It was nearly ten o'clock before she left the flat. As Max watched her go, there was something almost pathetic in his attitude this morning, as if he realised that he couldn't take her help for granted, and that he was desperately anxious not to say anything which displeased her.

She had longed to get out.

When the door closed behind her, she wondered whether she should have left him.

She went downstairs, quickly at first, and was at the third landing—one flight of stairs below her little flat, which had once been an attic—when she saw the brown stain on the floor. At first, she didn't realise what it was; then she realised that it was dried blood.

Max's.

She hoped that she would not see any of the neighbours, and none of the tenants of the other flats appeared. Out in the street, it was sunny and pleasantly warm for March; a true spring day. No one seemed to take any special notice of her, and no motor cycle was in sight. She walked briskly towards the main road and the bus stop, and as she reached the corner of the street saw the newspaperman at his stand, and for the first time realised that the murder would probably be in the papers.

But would it—yet?

She bought her usual paper, the *Globe*. There was nothing about the murder in the headlines, and she reminded herself that it hadn't happened until the early hours, there was no reason why it should appear until the evening newspapers. But she found herself looking at the *stop press* and held her breath as she read:

> East End Jeweller found stabbed to death. Understood that Scotland Yard is consulting Mr. John Mannering about jewellery found at the scene of the crime.

. . . . .

The name of John Mannering gave Della the first lift in spirit that she had felt all the morning. It was familiar in two ways. First, she knew of the name in the same way as everyone who read the daily newspapers, for it was often mentioned—as in this case—that he was being consulted by the police. He owned a shop in the West End, although she could not think of the name of it, and he was a dealer in and

a connoisseur of precious stones and *objets d'art*. Every now and again he caused a mild sensation by finding jewels which had been stolen and which the police had been unable to trace, and there were those who said that through his shop he had access to a lot of information which was denied the police.

Everyone knew this about John Mannering.

Della knew a little more.

She worked in the offices of the Mid-Union Assurance Company, and knew that the Claims and Investigations Branch often consulted Mannering. His reputation stood as high as any inquiry agent or private detective employed by the company. For confidential work in the search for stolen jewels, Mannering was top of the list. She knew it as she knew so much about other matters of insurance, because she was secretary to a Departmental Manager, and——

It didn't matter how she knew; she knew.

John Mannering might be the man to help her, might be the one in whom she could confide.

Suddenly she felt in desperate haste to learn even more about him, and there was one easy way. The Claims Investigation Department of the Mid-Union would know him extremely well, and the man most likely to help her was Jimmy Haines.

She went to the office, apologised to her manager, asked and obtained permission to be off during the afternoon. It was easy to find an excuse for going to the Claims Investigation office. Haines was short, plump and oldish-looking; although in the early thirties, a man with whom she had spent an evening now and again, and she knew he would give his right hand to see her more often. His eyes lit up when she entered his office.

"Why, hallo, Della, nice to see you! I heard you weren't in."

"I was late," Della said, and added casually that a friend

had been taken ill, and she had done all she could to help. She had brought Haines queries on several claims, one of them where there was some reason to suspect that the owner had not lost the jewels as he claimed, but had sold them and faked the loss.

"Who would you go to about that?" Della asked, and she hoped that she sounded casual.

"Oh, I don't know," said Haines, frowning. "Goosens, probably, he's a sound chap. If it was a bigger job I'd go to Mannering, no one to touch him for big stuff, but he won't play for peanuts, and I don't blame him."

"Didn't I read about him in the paper this morning?"

"Probably. I've heard he's been consulted by the Yard about a murder out in Whitechapel, to identify some jewels found at the scene of the crime, so I had a quick check to make sure we weren't involved."

"Are we?"

"No, thanks be! Looks as if the murdered man, chap named Snow, was a fence in a big way but none of the stuff recovered there was insured by us."

"What I don't understand is why the police should consult a man like Mannering," said Della, as if puzzled. "Surely they've experts as reliable as he is."

"Open to question," said Haines, promptly, "but the police don't go to him simply for advice on jewels, they go because the owner of Quinns often gets to know what's been stolen and what's being offered on the market quicker than the police. They know that he'll pass some information on, but keep some to himself if he thinks it's something they don't have to know! Often been told there isn't a lot of love lost between Mannering and the Yard, but still, what am I gassing about? Let's have a look at your queries, that's what you're here for!"

Della spent twenty minutes with him, went back to the office and finished the morning's work, and left soon after

one o'clock. She had an oddly guilty feeling when her Manager told her to take off whatever time she needed.

All the morning, in spite of her inquiries, there had been a quality of unreality about everything that had happened; it was hard to believe that Max was at the flat, with that ugly wound, and that he had been in the shop when Snow had been killed.

She bought an early edition of an evening paper, and there were front-page pictures of Snow, who looked very old and careworn, and of John Mannering. Mannering must be one of the most photographed men in London, but she had almost forgotten what he looked like until she saw this.

A dark-haired, strikingly handsome man seemed to be smiling up at her out of the newspaper.

"I'm going to see him," Della decided abruptly. She felt her heart race as she made up her mind.

Haines had told her the address.

"Quinns, please," she said to a taxi-driver, "in Hart Row."

"I know Quinns," the cabby said.

6

JOHN MANNERING

At about the same time that Della Gill stepped into her taxi, John Mannering stepped out of one, opposite his shop. He paid off the driver, and then turned to look at the window from the other side of the narrow street. Hart Row had three centuries of history behind it; so had the narrow-fronted shop which he now owned with its oak fascia and the crooked, tiled roof. On the fascia, in gilt Old English lettering, was the single name :

Quinns

and Quinns, a shop where men and women could browse over old, lovely and often precious things, had been in existence nearly as long as Hart Row and the buildings.

Sight of the shop seldom failed to give Mannering a moment of deep satisfaction. Now, he watched two American women, both beautifully tailored, standing silently in a kind of worship of two jewelled Egyptian tunics displayed against a background of rich red velvet. Even from here he could see the lights glinting in the jewels.

One of the women said : "Let's go along, Hilda, I can't stay here and look at it any longer, it's just too wonderful not to be mine."

The other laughed, and they sauntered off.

Mannering crossed the road, still studying the tunics. Larraby, his manager, had dressed the window with a touch which was not far short of genius.

Mannering opened the door.

He knew that he had been observed —like everyone who came near—from the back of the shop, although when he

stepped inside it looked deserted and almost gloomy. Yet dotted about were lights which could be switched on to any of the pieces stored here—and treasured as if this was a museum rather than a shop. In a near corner, and glowing faintly, was a Genoese silver table. Near it was a small El Greco of an ascetic who looked thin and gaunt and sad; not far off a tiny Dutch panel would become alive with rich colours once the light above it was switched on. Crossed on the wall were two daggers with jewelled hilts, dating from the third century B.C., and grouped in one corner were some small gilt pieces of furniture, early French; and in another corner were some pieces of heavy oak from the days of William and Mary. Round the walls were small drawers, mostly containing jewels or miniature works of art.

Mannering went slowly towards the back of the shop, and his office, near the foot of the stairs. There, he knew, the assistants would be waiting one of them always kept an eye on the shop, making sure that no one came in unexpectedly. Mannering had not been here this morning, and had come straight from Scotland Yard.

A young, eager-looking man stepped into sight, slim, curly-haired.

"Good morning, sir!"

"'Morning, Jim. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you."

"Good. Any interest shown in fine arts today?"

The younger man smiled. "Nothing very firm, I'm afraid," he said, "but before Mr. Larraby left for Sothebys, Mr. and Mrs. van Hoorn called, and I understand that they're coming back this afternoon. They especially want to see you, sir."

"Don't let me go out before they arrive."

"I'll remind you," promised Jim, and eagerness still brightened his eyes as Mannering moved towards the closed door of his own office. "How did things go with you, sir?"

Mannering unlocked the office door, pushed it wide open, and then stood still for a moment, looking thoughtfully at his assistant. There were the good and the bad and the indifferent, and this was one of the most promising youngsters who had ever worked at Quinns. He knew little about any of the things in which Mannering dealt, but had a native appreciation of beauty and of old things, and he was learning fast. Yet there was little doubt that he had first applied for the job because of the magic name of John Mannering – who had just come from Scotland Yard after seeing Old Snowy in his shop, dead of a cut throat.

"Things went very unpleasantly," Mannering answered quietly. "The man who killed Old Snowy stabbed him several times before he killed him, and there was a lot of blood. There were also signs of a struggle, and I don't like to think of an old man fighting for his life, only to lose it, do you?"

"No," Jim said slowly, "I hadn't looked at it that way."

"I don't suppose you had, but it's a good way to look. Now, if you mean did we get anywhere, the answer is no, not yet. We found enough jewellery at the shop to make it clear that Old Snowy hadn't improved, he'd been buying stolen goods quite recently, but we didn't find the Midi diamonds."

"Oh." Jim's voice was sharp with disappointment.

"And we can't really be sure that Old Snowy had them, either," Mannering went on. "We simply know that they were offered to him, and that they're the kind of jewels he loved to handle."

"Was anything else missing, sir?"

"Some small stuff, as well as all the loose money from the safe—which might have been a few pounds, a few hundred pounds or even a few thousand," answered Mannering. "Now that's enough of that for the moment, I've a lot to do! Bring in the post, will you?"

"Yes, sir! right away."

"Thanks," said Mannering, and soon the assistant came back with half a dozen letters all addressed to the owner himself, and not to Quinns. "Make sure I'm not disturbed for half an hour or so, unless the van Hoorns come."

"Right, sir!"

The youngster went out and closed the door, and Mannering sat back at a small, bow-shaped desk, glanced up at the shelves containing dozens of books which would have given a collector joy, and saw – almost without noticing – a head and shoulders portrait of himself. His wife had painted this years before, and she had insisted that it should stay in the office. In it, she had given him the dress of a Regency dandy; and she had caught the expression in his eyes perfectly; and also caught the hint of challenge which was always there.

His wife was in Paris, and he did not expect her back for a week or more; there was an exhibition of modern paintings, in the Louvre, with several of hers in it. That was her life, this was his, and each found life absorbing – provided it didn't keep them apart for too long.

Mannering opened the letters.

There was little of importance, but an inquiry for some Chinese enamelled figures known to have been brought to England over a hundred and ten years ago, and now wanted for a museum in Pekin, might lead to an interesting search. He found himself wondering, who, in England, was likely to have the figures, and made a note to write to his chief New York contact, to ask him to make inquiries there, so much had been sold abroad in the last fifty years.

He made several other notes on sheets of paper, then pushed them aside, and took a slim notebook from his pocket. Here were all the details he had taken of the scene of the night's murder, a list of all the stolen jewels found

there, and notes of the condition of Old Snowy's shop, the old man's clothes, the stab wounds; everything.

In an odd way, Mannering had liked Old Snowy. So had the police. If one could accept that he had a different moral outlook, and could think of him simply as an individual, Old Snowy had been a likeable and certainly a knowledgeable man; few people in London had known as much about jewellery and its settings, there were half a dozen pieces in Quinns which Mannering had bought from him, knowing that they had been bought and not stolen.

Mannering was anxious to find the murderer chiefly because he had known and liked Snowy. The police wanted to find him for the obvious reasons. The savagery of the wounds made the old man's killer a killer extraordinary.

Mannering drummed his fingers on the desk, then picked up the telephone and dialled Whitehall 1212. Scotland Yard answered almost at once. He asked for Chief Inspector Bristow, who had been at Whitechapel with him for most of the morning, although it was possible that Bristow was at lunch.

He wasn't.

"Hallo, John, what brilliant idea have you got this time?"

"I'm as addle-pated as ever," Mannering said, as if forlorn. "Bill, how soon can you get some photographs over to me? I'd like to see how badly Snowy was knocked about in the fight."

"I've got some on my desk now, there should be some dry prints in an hour or so. Want one of each?"

"Please. And thanks."

"Always glad to help to stimulate a lazy mind," said Bristow dryly, and then in a different sharper tone: "What's *on* your mind?"

"I'd like to have a look at the photographs before telling you."

"I'll send 'em over," Bristow promised slowly, "in return

for a list of the names and formal description of the jewels we found at the shop."

"I'll send them back with your messenger."

"Good enough," said Bristow. "Thanks. Good-bye."

Mannering rang off.

He heard voices in the shop, coming over a muted loud speaker; there was Jim Ryall's voice and a girl's—a girl he didn't recognise. Mannering turned the speaker volume down lower, so that it was almost impossible to hear anything except a droning, and began to write down a description of all the stolen jewels recovered at Snow's shop. A lot of insurance companies would be glad about this, and one or two collectors who had been robbed would bless the day that Snowy had been murdered and their jewels recovered. Mannering hardly gave this a thought as he wrote, referring only now and again to catalogues and his own records; most of the details he knew from memory

The couple were talking again.

He turned the volume up a little.

"I'm extremely sorry," Jim Ryall was saying. "I cannot disturb Mr. Mannering, but I don't think he'll be long."

After a pause, the girl said: "But it's very urgent."

Every woman who came into the shop to see Mannering was on a desperately urgent matter, even if they only wanted to find out whether he was like his photograph. Ryall was adept at getting rid of all but those who seemed really serious.

"I'd really like to help you," Ryall said, "but I'm afraid there isn't a thing I can do unless you care to tell me what it is you want to see him about?"

"It's—it's a personal matter."

Mannering thought she sounded young, and fancied that Ryall was serious when he said that he would like to help her; that suggested that she was attractive. There was nothing urgent on the desk now, and wouldn't be until the van

Hoorns came, or the photographs arrived, so Mannering pressed a bell in his desk and heard it ring faintly outside. A moment later the door opened, and a junior assistant named Gardener said:

"Yes, sir?"

"Reggie, take these notes and type them out right away, top and three copies," Mannering said, "and tell Jim that I want him at once."

"Yes, sir," said Reggie, and took the notes and ducked out.

Mannering opened the door quietly and looked into the shop. Ryall had his back towards the window, the girl her back towards the office; Mannering took a step farther out, so as to get some idea of what she looked like. Tall, dressed in a dark-blue suit, very well groomed, a little white hat rather like a skull-cap on her dark and attractive hair—if the side and front view kept this up it would be easy to understand why Ryall was sympathetic. A good profile, not exactly striking perhaps, but nice; short, straight nose, rather short upper lip, good lines to her chin and a figure which couldn't help but catch the eye.

Mannering went back into the office as young Reggie took his message, and almost at once there was a tap at the door.

"Yes, sir?" said Ryall, opening it.

"What does she want, Jim?"

"She won't tell me anything at all," said Ryall ruefully. "I tried to get something out of her, but she wouldn't give me a clue. She insists that it's personal, and I'm pretty sure that she hasn't come to buy anything. She's a Miss Della Gill."

"I'll see her," decided Mannering.

"Oh, good!" ejaculated Ryall.

When the girl came in, it was easy to understand why the youngster was so impressed. She had a heart-shaped face,

and an unusually good complexion—a skin that it was always difficult to believe in, yet could seldom be acquired. The lighting in the office was arranged so that it showed up every feature of everyone who came in, and Mannering liked her eyes; clear, grey, "honest".

"Miss Gill, sir," Ryall said.

"Thanks," said Mannering, and smiled, and motioned to a chair. He would soon find out if this was just an over-bold young woman who wanted to see *the* John Mannering. He didn't think that was why she was here, her expression was too serious, her eyes too anxious.

He proffered cigarettes from his case. She took one with long, white, capable fingers. Yet she lit the cigarette and drew at it rather fussily; either she wasn't a practised smoker or she was nervous—or both.

"How can I help you?" Mannering tried to make it sound as if he wanted to help.

When she spoke, he felt even more sure that she was desperately worried.

"I'm not—I'm not really sure that you can, but I think you might be able to," she said, and added abruptly: "Mr. Mannering, forgive me for asking this, but can you give me your word that anything I say will be treated confidentially?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'm sorry, but that isn't good enough," said Della Gill. He liked the way she stuck to her point. "It—it's absolutely a condition, Mr. Mannering, that's why I came to you. I was told —" She hesitated, without looking away from him, then she went on almost breathlessly: "I was told that you wouldn't go to the police, and it's essential that you shouldn't—not yet, anyhow."

As she finished, she leaned forward. The cigarette was tight between her fingers, but it looked as if she had completely forgotten that. Her eyes were really beautiful, earnest

and pleading; there was something really serious here. That was apparent from the way she sat so rigidly, from the way her eyes seemed to plead, from everything about her.

She had come on what was to her a matter of vital importance.

Why was it essential to her that he shouldn't go to the police?

7

PHOTOGRAPHS

DELLA thought: "He's going to say he won't promise."

She looked into Mannering's face as if willing him to say yes, but felt more sure than ever that he would not. It seemed like disaster. From the moment she had set eyes on him she had known that he could be trusted, been sure that he was the man to help her. In an odd way she had actually felt an easing of tension even when she had entered Quinns. Something about the atmosphere of the shop itself, and something about the manner of the man who had greeted her, had given her a kind of confidence which she needed, a feeling of solidity. Now she was making a demand which she knew was unreasonable, yet it seemed so vital that Mannering should agree.

He was no longer smiling.

He was more strikingly good-looking in the flesh than in the photograph. He was a little older, but somehow that did not seem to matter. The lines at his mouth and the corners of his eyes suggested that he smiled often. There was strength in him, and he was more impressive than she had expected, broad and tall.

He broke the long silence, pleasantly.

"Before I give you any kind of promise like that I ought to know what I'm promising," he said. "Is this visit about some crime?"

"Yes."

"Yours?"

"No."

"A friend's or relation's?"

"My—yes."

"A serious crime?"

She hesitated, then said: "Yes, very serious. One—one of them he didn't do, and that's more serious than the other, but they're both serious."

"Does this friend or relation know you're here?"

"No."

"Does he know you know about the crime?"

"Yes, yes, he " She broke off again, and it was some time before either of them spoke again, because she could not bring herself to speak of murder, and he seemed determined not to help, but to leave her to tell him what was on her mind.

. . . . .

It would be easy to make this girl break down, Mannering believed, and when she was in a highly emotional state, to make her tell her story without imposing any conditions, but if he did that, she probably wouldn't trust him afterwards, and it might be essential that she should. Yet there were obvious limits to what he could promise in advance.

He said abruptly: "How serious? Murder?"

The way the colour went from her cheeks told him that he was right. It hadn't really been hard to guess.

In spite of her pallor, she still eyed him very steadily; she had a lot of moral courage.

"I don't believe that my brother committed the murder," she said with great deliberation, "that was someone else."

"Obviously I can't withhold information from the police if it might lead to finding a murderer, Miss Gill," Mannering said reasonably. "But if your brother didn't commit the crime, and you feel sure of that, there's no real reason why I shouldn't try to prove his innocence. If I was working for him I'd be under no obligation to talk to the police unless it reached a stage where it seemed the only way to find the murderer. So I can promise you that I won't tell the police until I've had a good chance to look at the evidence."

This was most effectively said, with a straight face and a note of solemnity; that would impress her more. The essential thing was to win her trust completely. Yet Mannering wasn't thinking only about that, he was wondering what case it was, wondering who this brother was, and whether

She said abruptly: "I suppose I can't expect more than that, Mr. Mannering. I'd better tell you the simple truth, then you can ask me questions. I had no idea about my brother being a thief, until the early hours of this morning, and then . . ."

Mannering listened without taking notes, without any need to take them. The girl told her story as if she remembered every tiny detail vividly, and as if most of them hurt her. He had a feeling that she wasn't so sure of her brother's innocence as she had made out, but that she wanted desperately to establish that this Max Gill was innocent of the murder.

When she finished she seemed to hold her breath while waiting for his comment. He didn't keep her long, and there was a sense of urgency about him.

"The first thing I want to do is talk to your brother," he said. "I need all the details he can give me. Do you say he's at your flat on his own?"

"Yes."

"Badly hurt but just able to move about?"

"Well, I don't think he should, but——" She broke off, as if she didn't quite know what to say.

"I'll go and talk to him, and I'll put someone at the flat to stay with him," Mannering promised. "If it's going to last for long he'd better be moved from there to somewhere else, we don't want you in trouble." He was brisk and crisp as he intended to be, and he saw hope and gratitude spring to the girl's eyes. "You'd better telephone him——" He broke off, frowning at himself. "Let's work this out from

his point of view. You've taken a chance in telling me, but your brother might not think that's such a good idea."

"He certainly wouldn't!"

"So if you telephone and say that I'm on the way, he might get up and leave the flat, when it wouldn't be so easy to find him. I'd better go on my own. If you'll lend me your key he needn't have any warning at all. Will you?"

"Well, yes, but wouldn't it be better if I came with you?"

"I'd rather see him alone first," said Mannering. "We can see him together afterwards. Then there's another thing. Someone with some medical knowledge ought to have a look at his wounds. I'll arrange that, if——"

He broke off, and the girl caught her breath.

"I'll arrange it if I think there's a reasonable chance that he didn't kill Old Snowy," Mannering went on very deliberately. "If I think the evidence suggests that he did, then there isn't anything I can do except tell the police. Don't you agree?"

She didn't speak, just nodded her head.

"Right, then," said Mannering briskly again, and pressed a bell on the desk as he went on. The urgency still seemed in his manner, as if he was anxious not to waste a moment. "You say that the man on the motor cycle was named Archy?"

"Yes."

"And he said he'd watch the flat."

"Yes."

"But you didn't hear him go off last night, he wasn't outside the house this morning, and you noticed no one loitering near."

"I'm sure there wasn't anyone."

"Milkman, postman, tradesman, anyone like that?"

"Well, I don't know about them," Della Gill confessed. "I wasn't thinking of tradesmen, only for someone on a motor cycle. Do you think——?"

The door opened before she could finish, and Ryall appeared. Mannering noticed that he glanced at the girl first; there wasn't anything surprising about that.

"Ah, Jim," said Mannering. "Telephone Mr. Larraby, at Sothebys, and get him on the line."

"Yes, sir."

"And who's upstairs?"

"Charlie, sir, and Mr. Warner."

"Tell Mr. Warner that we'll want him in the shop, as you're going out to do a job for me. But get Larraby on the line first."

"Right away, sir!" Ryall's eyes were bright and hopeful. He went out, closed the door, and within two minutes the telephone rang on Mannering's desk; Della Gill started at the sound.

She hadn't spoken since Ryall had come in; she seemed almost overcome by the speed of these arrangements.

"Hallo, Josh?" Mannering spoke crisply into the telephone, and leaned back in his chair; somehow he looked younger, and there was a light in his eyes which suggested that he was enjoying himself.

"Yes, I do—I want you to arrange with Doc Daniels to be at 47 Clibber Street, Fulham, in an hour's time—as near an hour as you can, anyhow. Top-floor flat. Confidential, of course. . . . He may need to stay there two or three days, there's a patient. . . . Yes, all right. . . . Call me the moment you've news. Josh, a minute." He put a hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to Della. "What's your flat telephone number?"

"Fulham 19123."

"The telephone number at the flat is Fulham 19123," Mannering repeated. "If you can't get through to me here in twenty minutes, call me at that number in forty minutes' time. All clear? . . . Fine."

He rang off.

"Now I can see what Jimmy meant," Della Gill said in a choky voice.

"Jimmy?"

"Jimmy Haines, he told me that you were the best possible man to help, but——"

"Haines, of Mid Union Assurance?" asked Mannering, as if surprised.

"Yes, that's right. I work there."

"So Jimmy encouraged you to come and see me, did he?" said Mannering, and chuckled. He was standing up, briskly. "If you'd told young Ryall that, I expect he would have told me you were waiting as soon as you arrived." He paused, and then added very deliberately: "I think I ought to make one thing crystal clear. On the strength of your story I would have tried to have helped, whatever job it was. But in this case I'm already involved. I liked Old Snow, and I'm looking for some jewels which he was believed to have. My staff know that I was at Scotland Yard, and were ready to go into action. So we're quicker off the mark than we might be usually."

"What do you want me to do while you're gone?" Della asked.

"If you take my advice you'll go back to your office, and I'll telephone you there after I've seen your brother," Mannering said. "You'll be far better off there than waiting here or anywhere with nothing to do."

"I suppose I would," agreed Della. "All right."

"Good!" said Mannering. "I'm only waiting for a message from Larraby. If there's anything you've forgotten, this is a good time to tell me." His smile would have charmed the truth out of a stone.

"I think I've told you everything," Della said. "Except perhaps well, except that I think Max must have been mixed up in this kind of thing for a long time. He's changed a great deal in the last two years. Until then he was always

happy-go-lucky but a bit worried about money, he never had enough. Suddenly he seemed to have all he wanted, but he wasn't the same man. He was harder, somehow, he seldom troubled to come to see me, he was flippant and well, you see what I mean."

"I think I can see pretty clearly," Mannering said. "How about his other friends?"

"I don't know any of them, now."

"Girl friends?"

"Well——"

Mannering grinned. "A different one every time you saw him?"

"Yes, that's about it," Della admitted.

"Then at least it doesn't look as if he's being dominated or influenced by any particular woman," Mannering said. "Here's something you can do this evening, or earlier if you've time. Write down the names of all the people you do know, including the names of any of his girl friends, and any changes of habits, any places he goes to regularly—clubs, pubs, that kind of thing. I'd like to get a clear picture of the kind of life he's been leading."

"I'm not sure that I can help much," said Della dubiously. "I'll try, but I don't know——"

"Put everything down that you can," Mannering told her. Then the telephone bell rang, and he plucked the receiver up, leaning back in his chair, still with that sense of urgency.

"Hallo? . . .

"Oh, is he?" he added, a moment later. "Yes, I'll see him in two or three minutes. Meanwhile I want you to see Miss Gill back to her office, she'll tell you where it is. Then come straight back here and wait for instructions."

"Fine!" exclaimed Ryall.

"I really don't need——" Della began, but she broke off when she saw Mannering's expression, as she rang off, and looked almost frightened when he said :

"We don't really know what you'll need, Miss Gill. We do know that you've been threatened once, and that we're dealing with a murderer who may not hesitate to kill again. Until I'm quite sure you're safe, I'm going to have you accompanied everywhere you go. Jim Ryall won't mind, he'll jump at the chance to get out for a while."

Mannering watched Della into the shop, where Ryall was waiting, there was no mistaking his eagerness.

Standing with him at the side of a small desk was a tall, thin-looking man who carried a zip document case under his arm, and who held his trilby hat a little awkwardly. He seemed to be completely uninterested in Della Gill as she said good-bye to Mannering, thanked him, and went towards the front door. Ryall was just ahead, already talking amiably.

"Hallo, Sergeant," Mannering said to the tall man. "You've come for that list in person, have you?"

"Mr. Bristow thought it would be better if I came, sir," said the detective sergeant from the Yard. "I've brought the photographs."

"Fine," said Mannering. "Well, come in." He led the way, pressed the button, then took the photographs which the Sergeant had already taken out of the case. He tightened his lips as he looked down at them, and hardly seemed to notice when Reggie appeared at the door. He spoke without looking up.

"Those typed lists, Reggie?"

"I've done them, sir, here they are."

"Thanks. Give two to Sergeant Fenner, and put the others on my desk." Mannering gave Reggie a quick smile, but he wasn't thinking of Reggie, he was thinking of these pictures of the dead man, and of the little shop, the broken chairs, the chaos of the room, with all the indications that there had been a fierce fight. And he was thinking of the

danger to Della Gill's brother. He wanted to get to the flat in a hurry.

"Any message, sir?" asked the Sergeant.

"Nothing new," said Mannering mildly, but his eyes were hard. "We want this chap badly, don't we?"

"We want him *very* badly," Fenner said grimly.

"Had any luck with fingerprints?"

"Couldn't say, sir," said Fenner.

Mannering went with him to the door and watched him walking towards the street, not particularly brisk but quite fast moving, carrying not only the reports but also his secrets with him. If the police had found fingerprints they weren't likely to tell him, Mannering, at this stage; they wouldn't want any more help from him unless the case went sour on them, and they hoped that he might be able to help.

He had a pretty good idea of what the police would say if they knew what Della Gill had told him—and had given him a chance to ask Gill whether he knew anything about the Midi diamonds, the smaller jewels and the money which was missing from Snow's shop. The police photographs showed one thing which had puzzled him at the jewellers; there had been a struggle, but Snowy's clothes didn't suggest that he'd taken part in it.

Had Max Gill struggled with this other man, Syd?

A little before two o'clock, Mannering left Quinns; this time he used a runabout car he kept near the shop, an Austin, which was parked near Hart Row. Parking would be no problem in Fulham.

Now that he was on the move, he couldn't get to Della Gill's flat quickly enough. It was hours since she had been there; he might arrive too late.

8

MAN WITH A KNIFE

MANNERING turned into Clibber Street, and everything looked as normal as he would expect. It was not one of the most attractive streets. The tall houses, in groups of six, had narrow alleys between them leading to service alleys at the back. They looked tall and gaunt, and most of them needed decorating. One little Austin 7, twenty years or so old, stood outside one house, and a group of three cycles were lined up near another. Outside a third was a window-cleaner's barrow, with a long ladder straddling it, and two shorter ladders and a bucket in the barrow itself. This was pedal-propelled, fastened to a tricycle.

It was some distance from Number 47.

Mannering frowned when he saw it, and drove past. He did not see the window-cleaner, even when he got out of the car and looked up and down the street. The houses had narrow porches, if anyone was standing at one he would be able to see; but he saw no one at all. A woman pushing a pram appeared at one doorway, young and fair-haired and rosy-cheeked. She took no notice of him.

Mannering drove past the window-cleaner's barrow.

He parked fifty yards away, not too near to Number 47, and when he walked towards that house he studied the barrow. There were two buckets, and the wash leathers and other cloths that the cleaner would use. He wasn't likely to carry more than two buckets, and the indications were that he was not working inside one of the houses; certainly he wasn't working outside.

Mannering entered Number 47.

The hall was narrow and gloomy. The stairs were also

narrow, and facing the door; they seemed to go upwards for a long way, shiny at the sides and with a strip of linoleum in the middle. There was a faint smell of new paint. He took Della Gill's key out as he hurried up the stairs. He kept to the side close to the wall so that there was little risk of the stairs creaking. When he reached the first landing he stepped to one side, and avoided the shiny linoleum, on which his shoes might squeak.

There was no sound anywhere.

He went up another flight.

Here was the girl's flat, Number 5, and on the door beneath the bell push there was a card, on which was typed:

Della Gill, F.S.C.A.

He heard sounds, voices.

They might be from a radio.

He stepped closer to the door, and listened intently. After a few seconds he was sure that this was not a radio programme; a man was talking in a low-pitched, grating voice, and seemed to be close to the door.

Another man said: "No!" in a sharper voice.

The first man spoke again.

"I don't know!"

There was fear in the second man's voice, and menace in the other, although the words did not come through. The key was already in Mannering's hand. Slowly and carefully, he slid it into the lock, wishing he had some oil to make sure that he made no noise. There was quiet now, but as he began to turn the key he heard a gasp of sound, and then:

"*No!*"

He felt the pressure of the lock as it turned. He wondered if the door squeaked, and if the latch would click sharply when the door was open. He held his breath and steadied, ready to thrust the door back, almost certain of what was happening inside.

The key wouldn't turn any farther.

Provided the door wasn't bolted he could open it now. If it was bolted it would be almost impossible to shift the bolt from the outside without betraying his presence.

He pushed.

The door yielded.

He drew back, ready to thrust the door back hard, wondering if anything was in the way. Now that it was too late he wished he had asked Della about the lay-out of the room, the position of the bed, of the windows, all the things that might help in an emergency.

He pushed harder.

The door swung back, and he saw the scene vividly. Almost facing him, and staring with his mouth wide open, was a short man of middle age; the blade of a knife glistened in his hand. He was standing up by the bed on which the other man was lying, twisted round to gape at Mannering; and there was terror in his eyes. His right hand was raised as if to fend off an attack.

Mannering had only one advantage; the split second of complete surprise. But as he lunged forward the man with the knife backed away, swift and springy on his feet. There was not only wariness but also menace in his eyes.

The man on the bed gave a high-pitched, sighing sound.

The man with the knife said thinly: "Want this where it will hurt?"

Mannering pushed the door to behind him, but didn't quite close it. He had lost the advantage, and this man wouldn't hesitate to use the knife. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw proof of this; a fresh cut was bleeding quite freely on the chin of the man on the bed. And there was something tied round this man's waist, keeping him where he was.

He had been tied up and helpless, and the man with the knife had used it, obviously to try to make him talk.

All that, Mannering realised as he glimpsed the wound. Now, he faced the man with the knife.

. . . . . .

He faced more.

He was sure that he faced a killer—one whom he had seen, whose description he could give to the police, who might never escape if Mannering got away alive.

. . . . . .

Mannering stood with his arms by his side, the fingers lightly clenched, one foot forward and blocking the doorway. He was quite sure of the odds. He was quite sure that he could expect no help from the man on the bed. He had no weapon, and if he put his hands to his pockets, the other would strike.

Then, he said in a hoarse voice: "So *you're* on the job, Mr. Ruddy Mannering."

Mannering said: "Why don't you have some sense, and put that knife away?"

"Mr. Ruddy Mannering," the other repeated softly, and he didn't move, didn't shift the position of the knife. "How did you get this far? Does Bristow ——?" He broke off abruptly.

"You haven't a chance. Put the knife away and play it the wise way," Mannering said.

But the door had begun to open, and now it swung wide, squeaking all the time, and showing the empty staircase behind him. There was silence, too. And there would not have been such utter silence if the police were here.

This man knew him, and knew that he did not always work with the police, too.

"Or did the girl——?" the speaker began.

Then he leapt forward.

He moved from a standing start and in the middle of a sentence, to catch Mannering off his guard, to win back that precious moment of surprise. The knife flashed as he raised

it. Mannering had not time to step to one side, he swayed so that the knife, sweeping down, passed within an inch of his sleeve. Then he swung his right fist towards the other's chin, and for a split second the man was off-balance.

But the door, swinging, banged against Mannering's fist.

Pain at his knuckles came sharp and severe, he hadn't a chance to finish the blow. He saw a glint of triumph in the other man's eyes, and knew that this might be the end of everything, even of Life. There he was, swaying, his knuckles smarting, and the other was on balance again, making another sweeping, murderous blow with the knife.

Mannering felt the sharp point of the blade on his neck.

He flung himself in the other direction, but the bed hampered him there, there was no room to manœuvre. The cut wasn't deep and didn't hurt much, but two or three more like it could be fatal. The man had changed his method of attack; they were closer together, and he thrust forward with the point of the knife only inches from Mannering's stomach. Mannering struck at the wiry wrist with the edge of his hand, and desperation gave him strength. The knife was pushed downward, the blade didn't slide into his flesh. He jolted the other's chin with a left swing, but the knife was coming upwards.

To kill.

Mannering brought his knee up savagely.

He felt the knife cut into the flesh just below the knee, saw his assailant forced backwards by the move, and saw his own one chance. He jumped forward with both fists clenched, striking at the other's face and hitting him on the nose, the chin, the mouth. He felt the man yield but didn't hear the knife drop, still could not be sure that it would not come sliding into his flesh. He dared not back away, but had to keep at close quarters; if the other had room to move——

The Mannering heard another sound, from behind him.

The thought of Doc Daniels flashed into his mind. Was this rescue?

Before he could turn round, he felt a heavy blow on the back of the head, then felt a sharp blow behind the right ear. As he staggered, helplessly, he realised that he was completely at this killer's mercy.

. . . . .

Mannering came up against a couch at knee level, and sprawled on to it. The knife blade would bring a searing pain when it came, wherever it came. He heard a mutter of voices as he turned round to try to defend himself against the next attack. The blows had made his eyes water; but he could just make out the figures of two men, one very near him; and he could make out the blade of the knife.

This man said:

"Get Gill out of here, I'll deal with Mannering."

"Listen, Mason ——"

"You heard me, didn't you?"

"I can't take Gill on the barrow!" the other man protested.

"Okay, okay, telephone for Archy, he'll bring the car, then get Gill out of here. If anyone sees you, say he's been taken ill, say——"

He could have killed Mannering by then.

He had had his chance and lost it, for Mannering was much steadier, although his head was still ringing, and within reach there were books and other things he could throw. There was a chair which he could use as a weapon, too. He could save himself if——

He heard someone running up the stairs, saw the change of expression on the faces of these two men, and saw them turn towards the stairs.

Coming up them was Doc Daniels, obviously alarmed by the noise, running fast but with both hands in sight and without any weapon.

"Look out!" cried Mannering. "Look out! He's got a knife!"

Anything might have happened then, from a final attempt to kill him to an attempt to kill the man on the bed. Mannering was out of reach of the chair, but he snatched a book from the top of a bookcase and hurled it at this Mason. Mason ducked, turned, and flung the knife at Mannering. It came like a dart, and the light travelled along the blade like lightning along a conductor. Mannering ducked. The knife went over his head and the blade struck the wall and fell.

Mason and the other man went rushing out of the room. They slammed the door behind them.

9

NEAR MISS

From the moment that he had been struck, Mannering had been fighting against odds. They were still against him. The blow must have been harder than he had realised, and his head was swimming, he staggered towards the door. He heard sounds, as of a scuffling, then a thud; then men, racing down the stairs. He heard no more voices. He went forward, although he was so unsteady, but had to fight to keep his balance. He reached the door and pulled it open, and there at the head of the stairs was Doc Daniels, a crumpled, motionless heap.

The footsteps stopped, abruptly; the men were outside in the street. If he tried to follow he would lose them, they wouldn't wait for the barrow and ladders, they would get to their car as soon as they could.

Following would be a waste of time, then, and he was in no condition to follow them, anyhow.

He bent down over Doc.

He didn't like the way the older man was lying, with one arm on the stairs, and one doubled beneath him, his legs doubled up, too. He felt for the pulse, and found it beating more steadily than he had hoped, and there was no sign of a wound, and no bleeding.

Mannering straightened up.

From downstairs, a timid call came: "What -what's happening up there?"

Mannering could see no one, but could picture a woman two landings below, anxious and scared as she waited. He straightened his hair and shrugged his coat into position, and then stepped over the Doc and went downstairs, briskly

enough. An elderly, grey-haired woman, wearing a flowered blue dress, was peering upwards from a partly open doorway.

"What *is* happening?" she demanded at sight of him, but held on to the door as if ready to dodge inside.

"No need to worry," Mannering said, as he went towards her. He stopped half-way down that flight of stairs, and summoned the smile that was reputed to work miracles. "Two friends of Miss Gill had a quarrel, that's all."

"A *quarrel*?" she echoed.

"That's right. You know Miss Gill, she——"

"Of course I know Della Gill, she's lived here nearly as long as I have," the faded little woman said. "Do you mean that two men quarrelled over *her*?"

"That's it!"

"Isn't she at business?"

"Oh, she's not upstairs, they were waiting for her," Mannering said glibly, and wondering if the story sounded as weak to her as it did to him. At least it explained the noise, and at least it couldn't be disproved, which was the main thing. "Her brother's at the flat today," he added. "He let them in."

"Oh," breathed the little woman, as if that explained everything. "I see, her *brother's* there."

"Yes, her brother Max."

"I *see*," the woman breathed, and gave a tremulous smile. "That 's all right, then, I *see*. Have you hurt yourself?"

"Oh, it's nothing," Mannering said, "only a scratch." The cut in his neck was throbbing a little, but not enough to worry him; the cut in his leg was more painful, but there was hardly any hole in the trouser-leg. "I'm going back to see Mr. Gill."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I *see*."

She went into her flat, yet Mannering had a feeling that she was watching him through the letter-box as he turned

and went back. He moved slowly, limping. No one else seemed to have been disturbed; that wasn't surprising, because Della had told him that most of the tenants were out all day.

He reached the top landing, and glanced over his shoulder, but the woman was out of sight, and he doubted whether she had followed him.

Doc Daniels was trying to get up.

"Take it easy," Mannering said. "Let me give you a hand." He bent down and eased the other to a sitting position. Doc looked dazed, and there was a red swelling on his long chin, and a scratch at the end of his thin and pointed nose; that was all. Mannering got him to his feet and helped him into the room, then went back for his bag, which was on the landing.

Max Gill was lying on his pillows, eyes wide open, still tied to the bed. He had obviously tried to undo the knot at the side of the bed, but hadn't succeeded, and now he watched Mannering and Doc Daniels, his lips quivering, as if he was as frightened of them as he had been of Mason.

. . . . .

It wasn't long before lanky Doc Daniels was himself again.

"Doc" was more than a courtesy title; he had been a general practitioner much of his life, but, some years ago, had been struck off the rolls for an *affaire* with a woman patient. From all accounts, Daniels had been more sinned against than sinning. Now he lived on the fringe of the medical world, and many of his one-time patients still came to him for advice. He made a reasonable living as a chiropodist, and doubtless prescribed medicines for some of his friends; the police knew nothing against him, and were concerned only to make sure that he did not set up an unofficial practice.

The Doc washed and put a plaster on Mannering's knee

—the cut was just below and at the side of the knee, a little awkward as he walked, that was all—and tidied up the scratch at Mannering's neck. Then Mannering untied Max Gill, who hadn't said a word, just lay there.

"Let me have a look at that hole in his belly," Doc Daniels said brusquely, and sat at the side of the bed as he examined the wound. "Hmm. Could be worse, the chief trouble about that is that every time he moves it'll open again."

"What did you bring with you?"

"Everything I was likely to need," said Daniels, and picked up his little black bag. "We ought to get him out of those clothes, we can find a pair of pyjamas for him later. I'll need some boiling water, and a towel or two, I've got everything else. Put a kettle on, will you, and then I'll have a look at his neck." As Mannering went out of the room, Daniels examined Gill's other wounds, grunted, and said: "They'll do, they need cleaning up again, that's all."

Mannering came back.

"If you ask me, this chap's struck dumb," said Daniels, "He's hardly opened his mouth."

"He will," said Mannering heavily.

He reasoned that Gill didn't know who they were, had no idea that his sister had sent anyone to the flat. He had been terrified of Mason, and would be in fear of being found out for his part in last night's affair. His obvious course was to play dumb if he could — as if he had been frightened into a kind of stupor, and the only time he had betrayed the fact that it was an act was when he had said: "I can take it." He didn't help them to take his clothes off, but at least he didn't make it more difficult, either. Naked, he lay on the bed with the sheet drawn up to his hips, while the Doc attended to the wounds. Gill was tight lipped, but didn't flinch. When it was finished, the Doc pulled the sheet farther up, and put blankets on top of them, and Mannering said:

"Can he talk?"

"Talk won't hurt him."

Mannering's eyes asked: "Sure?"

"Hasn't he shown you how tough he is?" Doc Daniels demanded. "He can talk, you needn't worry."

Mannering still didn't look at Gill, but he could sense the youth's tension. Remember, he had no idea who he and Doc Daniels were. They had sent Mason away, and had saved him, Gill, from more torture; and Mason had tried to kill Mannering; but for all Max Gill knew, his rescuers might be police. Alternatively, they might report to the police, or even prove to be as deadly as Mason.

"I know what I'm going to do," said Doc Daniels, unexpectedly. "I'm going to make myself a cup of tea. I'll be seeing you."

He went into the kitchen and closed the door; and as it snapped too, it seemed to tell Mannering that it would stay closed until he chose to open it.

Now, Mannering was alone with Della Gill's brother.

Take away Gill's pallor and take away his fear, and he would be a good-looking youngster. The middle twenties, Mannering guessed. He was strong-looking, but his eyes hadn't the openness of his sister's, there was something almost crafty about them. He lay quite still, his eyes open until he closed them and kept them closed; as a man who felt sick and weary might.

Mannering stood looking down at him.

He took out cigarettes, lit one, and drew at it slowly.

He saw the youth's eyelids flicker, and saw his lips twitch; he wasn't exhausted, just wanted to pretend that he was.

Mannering said, softly: "Why did you kill Old Snowy?"

Gill's eyes opened in a flash, he opened his lips too, but he didn't speak at once, he stared at Mannering as if he was trying to guess how much Mannering knew.

"Well, why did you, Gill?"

"I didn't kill him!"

"That's easy to say. You were there."

"I—I wasn't——" Gill began, and then his voice and his gaze faltered, as if he realised that there was no point in lying. "I went along with them, but I didn't kill Snowy, I wouldn't touch anything with murder in it. I didn't know Syd was armed, I——"

"Who is this Syd?"

"I don't know any more than you do, he——"

"What's he like?"

"He's got a beard, and he—well, he's just Syd. I don't know him well, there wasn't much light on in the place. I—I've always dealt with Mason."

"Where can I find Mason?"

"I don't know," Max answered in a whisper, "we meet in cafés and pubs, I don't know where to find him. I didn't kill Snowy, you mustn't tell the police I was there. I——"

"Your prints were there," Mannering said, "they'll have a good start."

Gill flinched.

So he hadn't even protected himself against leaving fingerprints; that was how clever he could be. There might not have been any prints, though; Det.-Sergeant Fenner hadn't committed himself. Except for Gill's own statement, there might be no way of proving that he had been at the jeweller's shop last night. But Gill thought there was proof, and that mattered most just now.

"You're going to have a long job convincing the police about all this," Mannering said roughly, "Why don't you give it a rest and tell me the truth?"

"I've told you the truth," Gill asserted, and he was beginning to sweat. "I didn't kill Snow, no one can prove I did! Even if I left a print——" He broke off, as if he hated admitting that; and as if he knew exactly how black things would appear against him, and then he spoke again in a

voice which was much higher, as if he wanted to strike out and to hurt, as he had been hurt. "What's it to do with you? Who are you? How did you get here? Who sent you?"

He was gasping for breath as he finished.

"Let's just say I followed Mason because I knew where Mason was last night," said Mannering softly. "Let's say that I have only to pick up that telephone and dial Whitehall 1212 to bring the police here in five minutes. How does it sound?"

"I—I didn't kill Snowy!"

"And you don't know Syd's real name or what he looks like, so you can't help the police to trace him," Mannering said, and went on even more softly: "There's just one thing that might persuade me not to call the police, Gill. Just one thing."

"W-w-w-what's that?" Gill gasped.

"Just tell me where to find the Midi diamonds," said Mannering.

10

LIE?

THERE was a tense moment while Mannering thought that Della Gill's brother was going to say "yes". His mouth dropped, and a different expression showed in his eyes; undoubtedly one of surprise. His lips still trembled, and it was a long time before he spoke. During that time Mannering believed that he was weighing his words, and trying to make sure that he said the right thing.

Then:

"The—the *what* diamonds?" he asked weakly.

"You heard me. The Midi diamonds."

"I—I've never heard of them," Max Gill asserted unsteadily, and he closed his eyes and leaned back, pressing a hand against his forehead. "My head's nearly splitting, I can't even think."

"But you can lie," Mannering said.

Gill didn't open his eyes.

"I'm not lying, I've told you the truth," he insisted in that weak voice. "I've never heard of them."

"What did Mason want?" Mannering asked abruptly.

This answer came promptly:

"He –he thought I'd give him away, that's all, he –he threatened to kill me if I did."

"He came to ask you where you'd hidden the rest of the stuff from Snow's shop," Mannering rasped.

Gill shook his head slowly, keeping his eyes tightly closed; it was only just possible to hear his words. This was an act, of course, he was trading on his physical weakness; and he looked really ill. Any doctor would probably say that he ought to be allowed to rest; a police surgeon

certainly wouldn't allow the police to go on questioning him.

"Told you the truth," he muttered. "Mason said he—he'd kill me if I squealed on him, that's what he wanted. I've told you the truth!"

. . . . . .

Mannering went into the little kitchen, where Doc Daniels was leaning against the sink, playing with an old pipe, and watching lazy puffs of steam come from the kettle spout; the kettle, on a low gas, was singing. He pulled a wry face as Mannering entered, and said:

"Makes a good liar, doesn't he?"

"I think so, too. How bad is he?" asked Mannering.

"Between you and me I don't know," said Daniels, "it depends on how much blood he lost. Leave him as he is, and look after him for a bit and he'll be all right, but if you apply too much pressure he might take a nasty turn. My advice is let him alone for a bit."

"I was afraid of that. Will you look after him, Doc?"

"Josh said you'd a job for me, and if this is it, all right," agreed Daniels. "I'd prefer nicer company, but quack doctors can't be choosers." There was a depth of bitterness in his voice when he said that.

"What I want you to do is stay with him, and make sure that he doesn't run out on us," said Mannering; "the quicker we can talk roughly to him the better."

"I never was a curious-minded man on things like this," Daniels remarked, "but I could bear to know what this is all about. Last night's job at Whitechapel?"

"Yes."

"Think Gill did it?"

"He was there."

"Makes him a murderer in the eyes of the law, and makes me guilty of withholding material facts and shielding a man wanted by the law, and -don't get me wrong, Mannering,

I'll do it! If I think it's worth it, that is, and I don't mean whether I get paid enough."

Mannering smiled as he watched Daniels make the tea; tea-cups and a tray were all ready. He didn't speak until the tea was brewing, and Daniels leaned back against the sink again, taking the old pipe from his lips and looking at Mannering from beneath his shaggy, greying eyebrows.

"Look at it this way," said Mannering, quietly. Then he broke off and turned towards the door, opening it very softly; but Gill was still on the bed, and he couldn't possibly hear what was being said. He closed the door. "First, the Midi diamonds were almost certainly stolen from Old Snowy's place, and they're worth all of fifty thousand pounds. I think that Gill took them and I'm pretty sure that Syd thinks he did. So he parked them on his way here, or else gave them to someone else. Either way he's the only man who's able to tell us. If we turn him over to the police now, they might possibly get it out of him, but they probably won't. If he's arrested, then this man Syd and the others will go to earth, and it will be a big job trying to find them. As far as I could judge from the way Mason used the knife just now, he's a professional killer, and probably works for another killer, so we want Mason and Syd very badly. That makes this chap the bait for both them and the Midi diamonds while he's free, and bait for neither while he's awaiting trial in custody."

Daniels grinned.

"You could make black sound white," he said. "What else is there? You acting for the insurance company which covered the Midi diamonds?"

Mannering said quietly: "No."

"Oh. Sorry I impugned you!"

"You didn't. I'm acting for the woman who owns the Midis, and from whom they were stolen three months ago.

She's not only old, she's old-fashioned. She didn't insure them, and their loss is practically her ruin."

"All right, all right, I'm in," said Daniels. "I don't need any more persuading."

"There's just one other thing," Mannering told him. "This isn't Gill's flat, it's his sister's. He came here last night, knowing that Syd and his amiable friends would come, and he didn't worry about submitting his sister to threats and menaces and a lot more. I haven't much time for Maximillian Gill, but his sister remains his sister."

"You've got a full house," said Daniels, dryly. "How about that cup of tea? And how about this sister? Where is she going to stay? If you think I'm going to nurse Gill and act as housemaid for his sister ——"

"I'm going to collect a few oddments for her, and take them away in a suitcase," Mannering said. "We'll find her somewhere else to stay." He sipped his tea. "As a matter of fact you'd better do that, Doc; I want to look through the things in Gill's pockets."

When he went into the big room, Gill still lay with his eyes closed, looking very pale. It was almost possible to believe that he was as ill as he looked. He did not open his eyes and showed no interest while Mannering ran through his pockets, looking for anything which might have been brought from Snowy's. Finding nothing, he looked for his address and for the names and addresses of anyone who might know something about him.

His address was *41, Lee Walk, West Kensington.*

In his wallet there were letters from three girls, each couched in affectionate terms, two strongly perfumed, each suggesting that the writers felt they had good reason to think that Max Gill was likely to marry them. There were no other letters, and one of these carried no address. The others did, and he made a note of them, together with Gill's address, then checked the contents in his pockets.

There was a key, but nothing else that seemed of interest; no weapon, nothing which had been taken from the jeweller's shop. Satisfied, Mannering turned away from the table, Daniels stood in front of him with a suitcase in his hand.

"If I've forgotten anything, charge me ten per cent of my fee," he said.

"I'll charge you all right! What do you make of Gill?"

"He's asleep."

"Sure?"

"Dead asleep. He'll probably be like that for several hours, and when he comes round he should be more or less in ripe condition for you, Mannering." Daniels put the suitcase down.

"Right, now I'll call Josh, and have him send a couple of strong-arm men over; he knows where to find them," Mannering said. He telephoned at once, and Larraby promised to get two men quickly. "One at the back and one at the front, Josh," Mannering finished, and rang off and looked at Daniels. "All right?"

"I could have managed. Costing you a pretty penny, all this."

"I'll put it down to expenses," said Mannering, dryly. "Thanks, Doc. I'll see you soon."

"Fine," said Daniels.

Mannering carried the suitcase down the stairs, walking briskly, and making enough noise to be heard by anyone in the other flats. As he neared the front door he glanced round, and he saw the timid little woman staring, while holding the door ajar as if she was ready to slam it any moment. He waved to her as he reached the front door.

Nothing was quite certain in this affair, and he knew too little about it to feel sure of anything; but the sixth sense which had made him famous—or notorious, according to the way one looked at it—seemed to whisper a warning:

Be careful. He opened the door cautiously. He didn't think that Mason or the other man would still be here, but they might. The greatest danger, as he saw it, was that Mason might be ruthless enough to kill anyone who knew exactly what he looked like.

Gill knew him.

Mannering knew him.

Della Gill had seen him only when masked.

Mannering stepped into the street. The window-cleaner's barrow had gone, but the three bicycles and the little Austin as well as his own car were still in the street, and there was another, larger car at one corner. He went very quickly towards his own car. No one appeared to be watching him, but he did not feel completely secure until he had driven round two corners and was sure that he was not followed.

Then he drove towards his own Chelsea flat, not far away from there.

He was wondering how to prevent Della Gill from going to her flat until her brother was gone. She'd be raring to go. He could telephone her, visit her at the Mid-Union, or wait until she left that evening.

He'd do it, somehow.

He stopped thinking about Della Gill.

He was in King's Road, approaching the end of Green Street, where he lived, when he saw a Flying Squad car. He recognised the driver, who was travelling faster than usual, and passed him as if he was really in a hurry. The car swung round a corner of the street before Green Street, and when Mannering passed it, it had stopped and a man was getting out quickly.

Mannering felt a sudden, fierce quiver of excitement.

He knew exactly what this meant; the police weren't sure of what he was up to, and were having his flat watched. The quickest way to the flat, and Green Street, from the spot where the Squad Car had stopped was by foot, across a plot

of empty land where there had once been houses. The sense of excitement remained as Mannering turned into his street. This was short and wide, there were two rows of houses on one side, long terrace with gaps in it—these houses, too, had been demolished during German air-raids. There was talk of building some new houses soon, but now there remained just an empty plot, handy as a car park, handy for the small children of the district to play their games.

Mannering decided to park there.

As he drew into the empty plot, he saw a heavily built man standing on the other side of it, in the neighbouring street; that was the man from the Yard. Now Mannering's excitement was quieter and controlled; there was a touch of danger in being watched by the police, and that would always stimulate him, but why were they watching?

As far as he knew, they had no reason.

Until he had decided to help Della Gill, there had been no reason, and it wasn't likely that they knew anything about Gill's association with old Snowy's murder.

Or did they know about it?

It was easy to believe that the police were always slow; they weren't by any means. Syd, Mason and Archy had been involved as well as Gill. It was possible that there had been other fingerprints, or that the forced entry to the jeweller's shop had carried a burglar's trademark which the police knew and which he didn't. Whatever the cause, the fact remained; the police had sent a man here in a hurry, and probably before long they would have the front of the house watched as well. Someone might be lurking in the window of a house opposite, so that everything he did in the street and on the empty plot was being observed now.

He walked to the house where he had his flat.

It was much larger than the house he had just come from, but there were several similarities; among them, his flat was on the top floor. No one was there, now—as Lorna was

away, he had arranged for the maid to have a week off, and he was staying at his club. He'd come here now because he had time to think, without interruption; he could do any telephoning that he wanted from here, he could watch the Flying Squad man.

Why was he there?

Mannering saw that the lift, recently installed, was on the ground floor. He went in and pressed the button, and it crawled upwards. He told himself that he must not become too preoccupied with the Yard's move, there were all the other factors to be taken into account, including the possibility that Syd would want him dead, because he could identify him.

The lift stopped and he stepped out and towards the front door of his own flat. He went towards it, key in hand, quite unaware of the possibility of danger.

. . . . . .

A man waited, inside the flat.

11

WELCOME

MANNERING inserted his key, turned the lock, and opened the door slowly. Perhaps he was more perceptive than usual; perhaps the knowledge that the police were watching, and there might be grave personal danger, sharpened that sixth sense. But instead of stepping right into the flat, he hesitated with the door ajar, looking into the large entrance hall. The kitchen led off it, to the right; next to that was the bathroom. Almost opposite him was the door of his bedroom, next to that a small study and then the largest room in the house, the drawing-room, overlooking Green Street.

Everything seemed to be as usual.

He stepped inside and closed the door.

Everything *looked* normal, but there was something he didn't expect; a slight smell of fresh tobacco smoke.

Could that be fancy?

He looked about the entrance hall, and glanced intently at every door. He had not locked them that morning, but over the years he had acquired the habit of closing them whenever everyone was to be out of the flat. Lorna, his wife, had trained every servant to do the same thing, and it had become an accepted practice.

But the door of the study was not tightly closed; it stood ajar.

Mannering began to whistle, softly but loudly enough to be heard if anyone was there. He turned towards the bedroom and stepped inside, letting the door bang against a support, so that it could easily be heard. He didn't close the door behind him but went swiftly towards the wardrobe. This was flush with a wall to the left of the door, and no one

could see what he was doing. He bent down on one knee, and unlocked a long drawer at the foot of the wardrobe, opened it, and drew out a long, heavy, locked box. He used another key on this, and as he turned back the lid, saw the two small automatics and several rounds of ammunition.

One gun was loaded.

He checked that, then slipped the gun into his pocket.

Although he had tried to behave and to sound normal, he felt his heart beating fast, and was ready for any kind of attack. He tiptoed towards the open door, and peered through the crack where it was hinged to the wall.

No one was in sight.

Still moving without any attempt at concealment, and doing nothing to suggest that he had noticed anything wrong, he went into the entrance hall and towards the study. Just outside it, he stopped.

"Damn!" he said aloud.

He went across to the drawing-room.

With this door ajar, he could see the study door clearly. He went in, and waited. He told himself that there was a possibility that this was a coincidence and that he had just surprised a thief; but at heart he believed that this was Syd, or one of Syd's men.

He would soon know.

He waited for several minutes, and nothing happened; the flat was so silent that he almost began to wonder whether he had left the study door ajar by mistake.

But at last it began to open very slowly. It seemed an age before a man appeared. Mannering didn't recognise his build and couldn't recognise his face, because he was wearing a handkerchief mask. He was short but broad and powerful-looking. He left the door wide open and stood for a moment; with his right hand in his pocket.

Was he also holding a gun?

If he was just a thief, surprised by the householder's re-

turn, he would make a beeline for the door now, careful to cause no noise, anxious only to get away. Invisible to him but able to see him very clearly, Mannering saw the way he stood and looked round at every door—and he saw his bright eyes and remembered how vividly Della had described them.

She had been very frightened of a broad, bulky man.

Now, he came towards the drawing-room door.

. . . . .

This was no coincidence.

The man had come to seek Mannering out. He knew that all the doors had been closed and that as this one was ajar, this was the most likely place to find his quarry. He moved quickly, and the thick carpet helped him to move quietly. His right hand was still in his pocket when he was half-way across the hall. By then, Mannering had to step to one side, or risk being seen.

Mannering moved and the man drew his hand out. He carried a knife.

Mannering flattened himself against the wall by the side of the door. He couldn't be seen, unless the man put his head round. The silence was so deep that Mannering almost felt that he dared not breathe. He wanted this man prisoner, did not want him hurt. The gun was to be used to frighten, that was all.

He drew nearer.

Mannering saw the door open slowly. First two or three inches; then, nearly a foot. Then, the from of the man's head showed, including the peak of a cloth cap, and any moment he would peer round the door.

Mannering pushed vigorously against the door.

It cracked against the bulky man's head, and sent him staggering backwards. As he went Mannering went forward, pulled the door wide, and jumped at him, as his knife weaved useless circles. He tried desperately to regain his

balance and to strike out, but he didn't have a chance. Mannering caught his wrist and twisted; the knife dropped, and the man squealed. Mannering pushed him bodily across the room until he came up against the wall, and while he was still moving, bent down and picked up the knife.

Then, he put his own gun into his pocket.

"This makes much less noise," he said, and ran his thumb along the edge of the blade. "Take your mask off, Mason."

Mason crouched against the wall, without making any attempt to obey. Was he frightened, or was he waiting for help—the kind of help he had received at Clibber Street?

Mannering glanced at the other doors. He could see them all, and there was no movement, only the study door was open, and that was wide.

He said, roughly: "Supposing you do as you're told?" and he stepped nearer his prisoner. But now he was highly sensitive to the possibility of another attack from behind, it was almost possible to imagine that he could hear a man creeping up behind him.

He stopped a yard from the masked man.

"Take it off," he repeated. Nothing in his voice or manner suggested awareness of any other danger, he seemed to be on top of the world. "Don't make any mistakes, I'm going to have it off and you're going to get hurt, unless——"

He moved, swiftly.

Mason hadn't expected it, and had no chance to get away or duck. Mannering struck him on the side of the jaw, two sharp, stunning blows. Mason gasped, gulped, and began to fall. Mannering let him fall and swung round, dropping the knife and snatching the gun out of his pocket.

Nothing happened.

"Well, well," Mannering said aloud, and he felt almost foolish. "No one else at home?" He moved, picked up the knife, then went towards the nearest door and flung it open

and looked inside: it was empty. He went to the study, where he thought the greatest danger lay, but the door of the study was so placed that he could peer through it, when ajar, and see everywhere inside.

It was also empty.

All of the rooms were empty, he had created the second man out of his imagination.

Mason was still unconscious, and Mannering went to the loft ladder leading off a small passage which led up to Lorna's studio. He went up the ladder, pushed the hatch back, and looked round, making quite sure that no one was there. Next he hurried downstairs, locked the front door, and then glanced out of the study window. The Yard man was still near the waste patch, and Mannering could not see anyone in Green Street.

Now he went back to his prisoner, turned him on his back, and pulled the mask down from his face. It didn't help much. He had never seen the thin features and the swarthy face before. He ran through Mason's pockets and transferred everything to his own, but the man was a professional; he carried no wallet, no letters, nothing at all that could give away his identity.

If he worked for Syd, it was more than ever certain that Syd did not intend to be caught.

Mannering lifted the man to his feet and then dragged him into the study. This was a small room, and every piece of furniture in it was nearly four hundred years old, for he liked the Elizabethan period above all others; it had a true sense of antiquity. In a corner was an oak settle, and he propped the man up on this. He smiled wryly, for the settle was also his safe at the flat, and Mason was sitting on several thousand pounds' worth of jewels and nearly a thousand pounds in cash.

"Ought to have gone into the kitchen," Mannering said *sotto voce*, "I could have thrown cold water over him

there." He didn't attempt to rouse the man, but sat down at a small table, marked with the scars of the ages, and checked the things he had taken from Mason's pockets. The only thing which might help were two keys.

Thoughtfully, Mannering lifted the telephone and dialled Quinns. Young Reggie answered, and Jim Ryall came on the line a moment later.

"Hallo, sir!" There was the boyish eagerness, which nothing could repress.

"See Miss Gill to her office safely, Jim?"

"Oh, yes, and I arranged to meet her at half-past five, sir, when she leaves," Ryall said. "I thought that would give plenty of time for you to get in touch with me, and that——"

"It's fine. I want you to do even more."

"I'm waiting!"

"Keep her away from her home. Tell her she mustn't go to her flat, or it will put her brother on the spot, and say I'd like to see her here, at my Green Street flat, at half-past seven or eight. Suggest that you have an early dinner together and then come on here."

"Nice work!" breathed Jim.

Mannering chuckled. "I hope Della Gill thinks so! Tell her that her brother's all right for the time being, and that a doctor's with him."

"That's her chief anxiety, she seems very fond of her brother," Ryall said. "I'll be especially glad to tell her that, sir."

"Fine, Jim. Now, is Josh there?"

"He came in five minutes ago," said Ryall. "Half a mo'."

It was more than "half a mo' ", but that didn't greatly matter. Mannering glanced across at his prisoner; his eyelids were flickering, and he had shifted his position. But by keeping his voice low, Mannering could be reasonably sure that he wasn't overheard.

"Hallo, Mr. Mannering," his shop manager said at last. "I'm sorry I was so long, I was with Mr. and Mrs. van Hoorn. They're extremely sorry to have missed you, as they have to leave for Southampton early tomorrow morning, but I assured them that it was absolutely unavoidable. I hope——" Larraby hesitated, and Mannering waited patiently, used to the ways of his man. "I *do* hope," Larraby repeated with gentle emphasis, "that it will not be necessary for me to leave them to one of the other assistants, I feel sure——"

"No, Josh. How about those two men for Clibber Street?"

"I've managed it, sir, they should be there by now."

"Fine," Mannering said. "I'll get over to the shop as soon as I can."

"May I encourage Mr. and Mrs. van Hoorn to hope that you might be able to see them before they leave?" Larraby inquired. "They can return at any time—later this afternoon or this evening."

"Tell them I'll be there by six o'clock," said Mannering.

"I will, sir."

Mannering put down the receiver slowly, watching Mason. Any moment now, the man would probably make his attempt to turn the tables.

This man had to talk. . . .

Mannering pushed the telephone away, then pulled some papers towards him, as if thinking that Mason was still unconscious. He saw the man's hands and body tense, saw him begin to ease himself from the settle. Still Mannering appeared to take no notice, but his chair was so placed that he could get to his feet in a flash, and when Mason sprang for the door——

The man went for it.

Mannering jumped up. Mason grabbed the handle, and turned and pulled, quite uselessly. In a kind of frenzy, he

kicked and tugged, while Mannering went up behind him, and slapped him sharply on the side of the head.

"Now we'll get down to business," he said.

He was quite prepared for the reaction.

Mason swung round, in wild fury, and kicked and struck out. Mannering gave a little ground, then grabbed Mason's wrist and twisted so that the man gasped in pain.

"That's better, unless you want to break your arm," said Mannering, "because that's what will happen if you try to get away. Now, who sent you? Was it Syd?"

The little man didn't answer, just stood helpless in Mannering's grip. Yet he gave Mannering an odd feeling; that nothing would make him talk, that he was utterly dominated by Syd, even at this moment.

. . . . .

Twenty minutes later, Mannering gave up trying.

The prisoner had not told a thing that helped in any way at all; the only possible help were the keys and that would help only when Mannering knew what lock they fitted.

He soon found one: a key fitted his own front door.

All Mason would say was that Syd had given it to him.

12

PROBLEMS

MANNERING had another urgent problem.

If he let Mason go it would strengthen Syd's hand. He could fool himself by thinking that he could follow Mason, but he would probably be shaken off. That could be forgotten. If he took him to the police, he would have to prefer some kind of charge. . . .

Well, why not?

Why not report to the police that he had found him in the flat? Mason wasn't likely to talk if he was taken into custody, he would give the same flat response as he had to Mannering. Moreover, there were the police outside, and it was possible that a detective in Green Street had seen Mason come here, and was waiting to find out what Mannering did about it.

Handing Mason over to the police seemed the answer unless he held him here and tried to make him talk later. A few hours of solitary confinement could have a salutary effect. He could carry him up to Lorna's studio, but it would be a continual anxiety.

"I'll hand him over," Mannering said aloud.

But he still hesitated.

If Mason had a record, the Yard would have a good start. If they had something to begin with, they might be able to loosen him up.

In fact, Mannering knew, here was a clash with the police, and he wanted to see it through. He always had, and he always would. Even against his better judgment, he would rather try to make Mason talk, so that the crooks could be tackled direct.

"I'll let him wait upstairs for a while," Mannering decided, and thus made his compromise. He forced Mason to go ahead of him up the loft ladder, covering him with his automatic, and once upstairs, made him handle a piece of white paper with a very shiny surface. Five minutes afterwards the man was lying flat on the floor beneath the big north light, bound and gagged so securely that he had no chance to get away.

When Mannering came down it was nearly four o'clock. He found himself thinking of the van Hoorns, and wishing them anywhere but at Quinns. If they were simply good customers it would not greatly matter; but they were also friends.

Larraby would have the two men sent to Clibber Street, and Doc Daniels was in control at the girl's flat. Ryall would make quite sure that he didn't lose Della Gill — he was probably telling himself that he had fallen on his feet, the first time he had assisted Mannering on work not directly connected with Quinns. There were plenty of problems, but nothing that need worry Mannering much — except the police.

Supposing they meant to search the flat, as soon as he was gone.

. . . . .

There was the fact that he, John Mannering, had once been wanted by the police—not as John Mannering but as a jewel thief whom they, the Press and the world at large knew as the Baron. There was the fact that the Baron had operated for years, always in defiance of the police, but, except in his very early days, always robbing the rich to help the poor; and robbing only the undeserving rich, rogues with whom the law could not catch up.

There was the fact that the man at Scotland Yard who had hunted the Baron was Superintendent William Bristow.

And there was the inescapable fact that even though they

were outwardly good friends, even though they had great mutual respect, and even though Bristow would sometimes deny it there was always at the back of his mind the fear that Mannering would become the Baron again.

For he knew the identity of the Baron, although he had never been able to prove it.

Now, Bristow had sent men to watch this house. He knew that the Midi diamonds were missing. He knew that Mannering's first love was precious stones.

There was little doubt that he suspected that Mannering was working on his own, and not wholly with the police, although he had been consulted. Less doubt that something that had happened in the past few hours had aroused his suspicions.

Well, that was the situation, and it had to be faced.

. . . . . .

Mannering stepped briskly out of the front door of the house, and turned towards his car. The Yard man was still in sight, but taking no apparent interest in him; Mannering got into the car and deliberately drove across the empty plot of land; there was a driveway into the adjoining street. He passed within a yard or two of the Yard man, who looked at him blankly.

Mannering turned into King's Road.

A taxi with its sign lit up was coming towards him, and Mannering stopped his car, jumped out, and waved the taxi down. The driver stopped without enthusiasm.

"Just drive me along Mickle Street, then to Green Street and then back here, will you?" Mannering asked mildly.

The man gaped.

"Thanks," smiled Mannering, and climbed inside.

The driver started off.

The Yard man was still in Mickle Street, but there was no one whom Mannering recognised in Green Street. No one stood outside the door of his house, no one appeared to be

showing any interest in it. He told the cabby to take him round once again, and then stopped almost opposite the Austin.

"Thanks," said Mannering again. "You never know what's going to happen next, do you?"

But he knew that only the one Yard man was watching openly—and yet in such a position that Mannering might never have suspected what he was doing.

Was there another, watching from a window? There was no way of telling.

Mannering got into his car again.

He didn't think there was any possibility that the Yard men had a search warrant, or were going to try to get into the flat, and they hadn't attempted to follow him. So their interest for the time being at least was in whoever went to the flat; or in whoever came away from it. He could have done without this preoccupation now, but had to face it.

Why had the police become hostile?

. . . . .

Mannering went to Quinns, spent half an hour with the van Hoorns, and saw them off in their huge shining Cadillac.

Nothing else had happened at the shop; everything was going according to plan, as far as he could find out. There was no sign of the police here, but C.I.D. men could watch from shops near by, without being seen.

Josh Larraby, whose curly hair was nearly white, and who looked older than his fifty-seven years, had a gentle manner and a gentle voice, and probably as deep a knowledge of the London underworld as any. Josh Larraby had one obsession: precious stones. He had once stolen some in order to satisfy it. When he had come out of jail Mannering had been ready to help him; now he was often in sole charge of all the treasures here at Quinns.

"Well, Josh, what can you tell me?" Mannering asked. He was in his office, with Larraby sitting opposite him.

"As a matter of fact, sir, very little," said Larraby. "I've made contact with a number of my friends, and usually they appear to have some idea of who commits a crime like that of last night, but this time no one seems to have any idea. No one even claims to know while refusing to name the thieves," Larraby added mildly.

"Has anything been heard of this Max Gill?"

"Not as far as I can trace."

"A Syd without a second name? Or an Archy?"

"No, sir."

"Hmm," said Mannering. "All wrapped in mystery. All right, Josh, thanks. How did Sothebys go?"

"I didn't buy anything, sir. The prices for the two miniatures in which you were interested were far too high."

"Pity," said Mannering. "Josh."

"Yes?"

"Bristow has a man or men watching Green Street."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"He isn't having the shop watched too, is he?"

"I should be very surprised, I've certainly noticed nothing," said Larraby, "but I'll go out and make sure."

"Thanks," said Mannering, and signed some correspondence while Larraby was out. He was back in a few minutes.

"If we are being kept under surveillance," he said, indulging in his fondness for the long word, "we can be sure that it is from one of the windows of the shops or properties opposite."

"That's what I think, and the interest may be only in Green Street," said Mannering, thoughtfully. "All right, Josh. I'm going over to Scotland Yard, all peace and sweet reason, and unless there's anything I'm specially wanted for, I won't come back tonight. Call me at the flat at about half-past seven."

"Very good," said Larraby.

Mannering drove straight to the Yard, but Bristow was

not in, and the Detective Inspector whom he saw was not particularly interested in any ideas Mannering had about the jewels which had been found at Old Snowy's. He showed slightly more interest when Mannering offered him the sheet of shiny-surfaced paper.

"Check if the prints on that are in *Records*, will you?"

"Yes Mr. Mannering, but you know we can't give any information to——"

"Just a yes or no will do," said Mannering, amiably. While he waited he recalled the days when he had been *persona grata* at the Yard. These days, the only man who ever really made him appear welcome was Superintendent Bristow, the one man who knew about him as the Baron.

There was real irony.

It was ten minutes before the D.I. came back, brisk and alert-looking; his expression gave nothing away.

"Any luck?" asked Mannering.

"No record," said the D.I. "but we're keeping the sheet of paper for reference, in case anything turns up. What's it all about, Mr. Mannering?"

"I'll talk it over with Bill Bristow," said Mannering, and gave his brightest smile, and left.

He had learned nothing, but had a feeling that the D.I. had been deliberately cagey.

Why?

He drove to Clibbér Street from the Yard, anxious to check how Gill was, and to go and look at Gill's own flat afterwards.

The little Austin was still there, and so was the larger car, but the bicycles had been moved. A small group of boys were playing cricket against a lamp-post, using a bat much too large for them. Mannering kicked their ball towards them as it rolled almost under his feet. One boy called: "*Ta!*" Mannering stepped towards Della Gill's apartment house, taking her key out of his pocket. He hid a smile as the

door of the little timid woman's flat opened just after he passed it. He doubted whether much missed her.

Then he tapped at the door of Della's flat.

There was no answer.

. . . . .

Mannering tapped again, and still there was no answer.

13

SHOCK

MANNERING took Della's key out of his pocket, and slid it into the lock, but he did not open the door. He listened, very tensely. He could hear the beating of his own heart, but that seemed to be the only sound until a car engine started up not far away. He pushed the door an inch or two, and waited; there was no response.

It was possible that Doc Daniels was dozing, that Gill was still in that dead sleep.

There was no sound from inside the room.

He pushed the door open sharply, then stood to one side; there was no movement, no attack.

Now he could see inside the room.

He felt sure that no one waited there for him, the stillness was so absolute; and one had a sense of when there was danger lurking. He looked in every corner of the room. The kitchen-door was open, and the only place that anyone could hide was behind it.

Where was Doc Daniels?

Where——

There was Max Gill, and Max Gill would never worry again. He would tell no more lies, either, for he had been killed; and he had been killed by a knife slash across the throat.

. . . . .

There he lay.

Judging from his position, Mannering doubted whether he had known that he was to be attacked. He was lying just as he had been when Mannering had left, and there was the same tired, relaxed look at his lips.

Mannering did not know how long he stood there, rooted to the spot, shocked out of conscious thought.

Then he thought :

"Doc?"

He moved towards the kitchen, slowly at first, then gaining speed. Where *was* Daniels? Behind that kitchen-door? Could he be dead, too?

Mannering looked behind it, and no one was there. Not only was the kitchen empty, but so was the tiny bathroom.

He saw something by the fire-escape door. A corner of a black rubber mat was stuck beneath it. It hadn't been when he had been in here talking to Daniels. He went across quickly, but opened the door very cautiously. It wasn't easy, the mat made it fit tightly, but at last it opened.

There was Doc Daniels, lying in a heap on the top landing.

Helpless?

He looked as still as death.

. . . . .

But he wasn't dead.

His pulse was beating quite steadily, there was no visible wound, and he was breathing quite normally. Mannering straightened the thin body out, and dragged Doc into the kitchen, then into the large room. When he lifted the man to the couch, his long legs hung over one end. He was much thinner even than Mannering had realised. There was a bruise at the back of his neck, and it was easy to see that he had been struck there.

This attack couldn't have happened more than a quarter of an hour or so ago.

If he had arrived half an hour earlier, Mannering might have saved Max Gill's life or he might have lost his own.

He found himself lighting a cigarette, as he looked down at the unconscious man. A dozen conflicting thoughts were in his mind, and he turned round to look at Gill again.

He saw Gill.

He also saw a mind picture of Della, and imagined what she would look like when she heard about this.

He heard a grunt from Daniels, and turned round. Daniels was blinking wildly as he struggled to sit up, and he looked scared.

"Take it easy, Doc," Mannering said mildly. "Just take it easy."

"Eh? Who——? Oh, *you*." Daniels gasped the words out, then fell silent as he sat up, pressing his hands against his eyes, as if the light hurt them. Then he asked abruptly: "Did they——?"

"Gill's dead."

"Oh, God."

They were both silent now.

Daniels wasn't a fighter; Daniels wasn't the kind of man who should have been left to cope with Syd or those who worked for Syd, and Larraby's men must have arrived too late. The bitterness of it.

"Mannering," Daniels began, and then stopped.

"How?" asked Mannering.

"There was a knock at the front door," Daniels told him huskily. "I was cagey, and didn't answer. Chap went away, I heard him. Soon afterwards the telephone began to ring. I thought it would wake Gill——"

He broke off.

He couldn't see Gill from where he sat, for Mannering was in the way; but he did not need to see. He moistened his lips, and shivered.

"I answered it. A man asked for Gill. I said he couldn't speak to him. You know how it goes—there was some argument, he started threatening what would happen to me if I didn't do what he wanted. I felt safe at the end of a telephone, so I told him a thing or two. I was standing—there." Daniels pointed. "Back to the kitchen-door, and this chap

was telling me something you'd forgotten, and then – [illegible] something but me.' He moved his hand to rub the back of his head gently. 'I didn't know another thing, so I ripped it out."

He paused again.

'Came round five minutes afterwards, I suppose. I was in the kitchen. A chap wearing a scarf over his face was standing in front of me, and he told me to tell you that you could forget the Midi diamonds you'd never find them – and that you could forget Syd, he was safe, never found out who he was, you'd end up dead.' Daniels closed his eyes. "Crude, I know, but that's how it was."

'He just talked of the Midis?"

"And you and the Syd."

'No other jewels?'

"No."

"No other names?"

"No."

"What did he look like?"

'Average, I suppose," said Daniels, gruffly. He looked as if he was made up for the stage. Mannering ——"

"Yes?"

"You'll have to tell me police."

Mannering didn't speak.

If he told the police now, he knew what would happen: they would hold him. They would probably hold Daniels, too. There wasn't a hope that they would simply tell him to go, that he shouldn't have kept Gill from them, should have handed him over at once. They would hold him, and they would Daniels—and then they would search the Green Street flat, among other places.

They would find the other prisoner.

Mannering could work on his own like this and get away with it and feel completely clear in his conscience but things had to go right. He was not getting any breaks. Well, who

could he blame but himself? If he'd told Bristow about Gill, he might have persuaded Bristow to let things go on as they were. Even if Bristow had taken the chance, he would have had the house watched; that would probably have saved Gill's life.

"Mannering," Daniels said again.

"Yes?"

"You don't carry a flask, do you?"

"No," said Mannering, "but I think——" He stepped across to the bookcase cupboard, opened it, and found Della's little bottle of brandy. "Have a sip of this." He handed it to Daniels, who nodded his thanks, unscrewed the cap, and sipped.

"There's no way out of telling the police," Daniels said.

Mannering still didn't comment.

"Get it out of your mind," Daniels urged. "We took a hell of a big chance, and we lost. That's bad enough. If we take another, it will go much worse for us. God knows there isn't much more that I have to lose, but you—you've everything. Call the police." After a moment, he added with an almost pathetic touch of irony; "That's Whitehall 1212."

Mannering didn't move, but he now said:

"You've plenty to lose, Doc."

"My reputation vanished last year."

"Only one side of it vanished. This way you could lose a lot more. So could I. The Yard isn't all that keen on its specialists consultants, and if they found out that I'd been trying to outsmart them, there's nothing they'd like more than to smack me down, hard. I don't know that I'd blame them."

Daniels said: "This goes deeper than what they might do to you. This Syd will kill you if he gets the chance, you know perfectly well that he will. You aren't a good life. If the police take over——"

"Doc," interrupted Mannering, very quietly, "if the

police are to take over, you'll have to make them. I'm not going to, yet."

Daniels didn't speak, but took another sip of the brandy. Then he put the cap on the bottle very deliberately, without looking at Mannering, and began to get up. Mannering wondered what was going on in his mind, and whether he meant to call the police now, without further argument. It was possible. Mannering didn't think that he would be able to steel himself to do it, but he might. As it was, he stepped past Mannering, and looked at Max Gill. Perhaps he was telling himself that it wouldn't be pleasant to look as Gill did now. Perhaps he was blaming himself for allowing it to happen. Perhaps he was cursing the fact that he, Mannering, had involved him in this.

How could you tell what was going on in another man's mind?

Daniels didn't turn round as he said flatly:

"Think his sister is in danger?"

"She could be."

"Can't you make sure?"

"I'm going to. I don't think this would have happened if I'd been half an hour earlier with the men Josh was sending round. They're probably downstairs."

"Oh," said Daniels, and turned round very slowly. "Supposing we don't call the police? What then? Supposing we conceal the body for a day or two—won't have to keep it here any longer than that, although if it's a case of must I could handle it. What do you intend to do?"

"Find this Syd."

"Unless this Syd finds you."

"Doc," said Mannering, steadily, "you came here and Syd's man recognised you, but no one else did. I'm the only other person who knows that you're involved. Why don't you go away, and stay away. If the rap comes, I'll take it."

"You trying to say I'm weak-kneed?"

"I'm trying to tell you that you needn't be involved any further."

"Oh, no," said Daniels, in a stronger voice. "I'm involved, and I won't take that way out. Either I'll send for the police or I'll do what you want. I can't make up my mind——" He broke off, and took the old pipe from his lips, tapping the stem against the teeth. There was a long silence, while he appeared to be trying to say something. Then he went on very quickly, almost roughly: "Why make it so damned hard for me? I know the position, so do you? If I get involved, it can't make much difference. If you do, you're very nearly finished and you're the kind of man that would hurt badly. I'm not forgetting your wife."

"What else aren't you forgetting?" asked Mannering.

Daniels' lips were twisted.

"You want to play this your own way, and it's taking a hell of a chance. I admire you for it. I don't admire myself, but then I've never had a very high opinion of me. John——" He snatched the pipe from his mouth, and went on in a voice which was almost savage with intensity: "How much is it worth if I do what you want? And don't look at me as if I'm vermin, either!"

Mannering said, very quietly: "What fee do you want for the job?"

"To make it worth while, it it would have to be big."

The blue eyes beneath the shaggy eyebrows, were very steady.

"You know I'm wealthy," Mannering said. "Why don't you name your fee?"

"Oh, hell," said Daniels, in the savage voice, "what did I have to be born this kind of fool for? You want to know something about me? I've no moral integrity at all. I've got everything else, but I've simply no moral integrity, and I'm flat broke. What about a couple of hundred pounds?"

"All right," said Mannering, quietly. "I'll arrange it in

the morning. If you take my advice you'll put it somewhere the police won't find out that you've got it; they might begin to wonder why." He lit a cigarette, and turned round abruptly; he caught sight of Gill, but it had no effect on him now. "I think you'd better get him off that bed, wrap him in sheets and blankets, and try to get rid of any traces of blood. They'll be mostly on the bedclothes." He looked down at the thin carpet, and saw no spots, noticed nothing which might give any indication of the blood that had been shed here. "If I haven't called you by ten o'clock, say, you go home. I'll let you know what I want you to do next. How long do you think it will take you to tidy things up here?"

"I'll need an hour," Daniels said. "What about you?"

"I want to pay another visit," Mannering told him. "I'm going to leave this to you."

He went towards the door, opened it, and let himself out.

. . . . .

He did not go straight to his flat, to the shop, or to Gill's place, where he intended to go next. He drove to a car park near Victoria station, left his car there, then took a taxi to some lock-up garages not far from the station. It was a quiet spot, and no one was about when he opened the door of one of the garages. Inside was a black Hillman Minx, a little drab and dirty. He closed the doors, switched on the light, then opened the boot of the car. Fitted close to the spare wheel was a long, wooden box rather like the box in which he kept the automatics at Green Street.

Inside this was theatrical make-up, good and varied enough for any professional. In the lid was a mirror which he cleaned off carefully, and then he placed this on the windscreen, where it hung easily, and began to make himself up. He worked very steadily and with complete sureness of touch, as if he was in a theatrical dressing-room, oblivious of everyone and everything near him. Traffic rumbled past

not far away, and now and again he heard the screech of a train whistle, but nothing disturbed him.

He was transformed in front of his own eyes.

His lean, tanned cheeks became plumper and rather pale; he used cheek pads to make sure of the plumpness. His eyes became shadowy and with small pouches, which would deceive anyone who saw him even at close quarters. The expression in his eyes changed, too, and he put a touch of gum at the corners, so that they were narrowed and looked slanting.

When he had finished, nearly twenty minutes later, he examined himself with great care, and then put everything back in the case and replaced it. Next, he opened a suitcase in the boot. He took out a suit of clothes, the waistcoat and the coat slightly padded, and the shoulders padded so as to make him look hump-backed. A pair of old, worn brown shoes completed the picture. When he was fully dressed and he looked at himself in the mirror again, it was like looking into the face of a stranger.

He winked at himself.

"You're as much a boy as Jim Ryall," he said.

Now he hurried, putting his own clothes away, closing the car, then opened the garage doors and driving out. He did not trouble to lock the garage door after him, but headed towards Kensington. He looked nearer sixty than forty, a heavily built, round-shouldered man; and when he was standing he would look several inches shorter than his true height.

No one was likely to recognise him.

No one had ever recognised him when he was made-up like this, that was why so few people had even suspected that John Mannering was the Baron.

He neared Kensington, then pulled into the side of the road and studied a street map, looking for Lee Walk—where Maximilian Gill had had his flat.

14

WHY?

Lee Walk, West Kensington, proved to be a little street with small houses on one side, and much taller, terraced houses across the road; nineteenth century and twentieth century facing each other in sharp contrast. The small houses were bright with fresh paint and large windows, the old ones had a look of gloom and frustration. Half-way along the street was a small park, with a few plane-trees and a worn grass plot, and here, too, children were playing cricket as Mannering drove past, looking for Number 41.

This was one of the smaller, modern houses.

He drew up some distance away from it, stopped the Hillman, but didn't get out at once. He studied the street behind him in the driving-mirror, and saw a man standing in the porch of one of the older houses. The man showed himself, now that he thought that Mannering could not see him; but as Mannering opened the car door and got out, the man had disappeared.

Was Gill's flat being watched?

Mannering stepped out briskly, walking heavily on his heels. Several people were coming from the far end of the street, and the buses and the Underground, for this was home-coming time. The footsteps of men and women seemed sharp with the eagerness to get home, the voices of the children seemed shrill. A woman opened a window and called:

"Johnny! I want you."

"Johnny, do you hear me?"

It was all so normal.

But when Mannering passed the house where the man

had appeared, the porch was empty. Mannering did not seem to study the windows, but saw that the curtains of the downstairs window were parted slightly in the middle, whereas those of the first floor were drawn right across.

He turned into the gateway of Number 41.

Because it was so small and modern, he felt as if everyone could see him. It was like being in an identity parade at a police station—or being closely watched by everyone in sight. But there was nothing about him that anyone could recognise. He saw two doors at Number 41, as there were at most of the smaller houses here; there were two flats in each house.

On one door was pinned a card: "*Maximilian Gill.*"

Two doors along, a man turned into a gateway, and Mannering was conscious of his curious stare. Neighbours would know Gill, but neighbours could not be sure that Gill hadn't given a stranger a key. He used Gill's key and stepped inside quickly, closed the door and hurried into the front room.

He looked across the road.

A man's face was at the window where the curtains were parted.

Mannering didn't touch these curtains, and didn't go near the window. He walked through the flat which had one large bedroom, one tiny room with a desk in it, and a living-room, kitchen and bathroom. Everything was fresh, bright and new. It wasn't cheap, either. The good-quality furniture was all modern.

Obviously Gill had lived here on his own, and most rooms were untidy. There was a pile of *Sporting Life* in one corner, and on the desk there were racing calendars, form books, everything needed to show how Gill had spent most of his time.

Mannering searched every room; everywhere.

He found no sign of the Midi diamonds, none of the other things missing from Snowy's place; in fact, he found noth-

ing of particular interest. There was an address book in the desk, and most of the names and addresses were of women, but Mannering slipped it into his pocket; Syd's might be here. There were several photographs of girls, mostly extravagantly posed, several of them nudes. A big picture of Marilyn Monroe at her most revealing was also in the little room.

Mannering found nothing else.

There were no weapons, no gun, few details of Max Gill's life which he didn't already know. There was no club address and little to indicate any serious interest. But two bank accounts showed that Gill had over a thousand pounds cash to his credit, whereas earlier bank statements, loose in a drawer, showed that he had been heavily in debt to the bank three years ago.

That coincided with what Della Gill had told Mannering.

He wasn't going to enjoy telling Della.

It was twenty-five minutes before he was finished.

He left the flat quite openly. There was no sign of the man at the window of the other house. He walked to the car and drove off, now sharply aware of the man standing on the porch and watching him.

Soon, Lee Walk was behind him, and he didn't think he would need to come back, unless it was to interview that watcher.

. . . . .

Nearly an hour later, as John Mannering again, he drove to Green Street, Chelsea, in the Austin.

. . . . .

He had felt sure that the man watching at Lee Walk was not a policeman; as sure that the man watching in Green Street was. Whereas the Flying Squad man whom he had first seen had kept in Mickle Street, watching from a distance, now a man who had plain-clothes detective written all over him was sitting at the wheel of a car at the end of

Green Street. The Yard did not have to use men who gave themselves away so clearly; they used such men only when they wanted to.

Obviously Bristow wanted Mannering to know that he was being watched.

Mannering drove on to the empty plot, and strolled back towards the detective, passing his own house as he did so. It was pleasant out here, and he gave the impression that he was in no hurry. Nothing betrayed the fact that his heart was beating much faster than usual. Danger as such didn't worry him; risks gave him excitement which he couldn't get any other way, even the years did not make his appetite for excitement much less; but he didn't relish anything which puzzled him.

Why should the Yard watch here?

Why had Bristow decided to make sure that he knew about being watched?

He reached the police car, and bent down to look inside.

"Hallo," he said amiably. "Detective Officer Corran, isn't it?"

A man who looked too big for the car glanced up, started and then grinned. He had a shy, boyish look.

"That's right, sir!"

"What have I done to deserve this?"

"*You*, sir?"

"Yes, Corran."

"Well, sir, you know that I can't tell you anything about what I'm doing," said Corran, with that broad, boyish grin, "can't stop you from guessing, though."

"Mr. Bristow send you here?"

"No, sir."

"Fenner?"

"Afraid I can't answer any questions, sir."

"Too bad," said Mannering, and his grin broadened. "If it gets too wearisome, come across and have a drink."

"The minute I'm off duty, sir!"

They both chuckled.

Mannering went across the road. He took his time, and studied the houses, tried to make sure whether Corran was the only man watching the front of his house. He saw no one else. His heart was still thumping uncomfortably. He was desperate to know the reason for the watch, and was acutely conscious of the difficulty he would have in explaining away the prisoner upstairs.

Would the police be waiting for him upstairs? If they had a search warrant, they might be inside. Directly he opened the door he might be confronted with Bristow, or Detective Sergeant Fenner, or the cold and outwardly disinterested Detective Inspector.

He went up the stairs, this time walking very quietly.

As he reached the third landing and approached the flight of steps leading to his own flat, he saw a pair of feet. A man was standing on the top landing, just outside his door. They looked like big feet; well, biggish. He had a choky feeling as he hesitated. Probably whoever was there knew that he was approaching, and if these were policemen there would be no point in going back.

Why was this happening?

He began to whistle, very softly, and took out his keys and jingled them. There was not only the prisoner in the studio, he reminded himself, there was the gun in his own pocket. It was true that he had a licence, but the police would ask a lot of awkward questions if they found one in his pocket.

Would they have a search warrant? Or the right to search him?

There was no way of telling.

. . . . .

At such a time as this, all the shadows of the old days, the shadows of the Baron, felt dark and heavy about Mannering. He did not know what the police would try to do, could

never be sure that Bristow and others would not try to bring the past into the present, to prove that he had stolen jewels in his possession.

The Midi diamonds, for instance.

There wasn't much doubt that they were looking for the Midis. That was probably why they were here. As the thought came, he felt a surge of relief, and wondered why he had been so obtuse before. Of course, they were looking for the Midis, and something made them suspect that he had them.

Was that it?

As he went farther up the stairs, and the feet seemed to turn into grey-trousered legs, the legs to a coat and then to hands, and as the whole man there came into sight, Mannering told himself that the real trouble was probably the Midi diamonds.

Then he realised who was waiting for him, and he stopped abruptly on the stairs, and chuckled. His reaction told him how tense he had been, and how edgy because this might have been a detective.

It was Josh Larraby.

. . . . .

The manager from Quinns waited patiently, smiling a greeting, and yet behind his smile there was disquiet. Mannering couldn't miss it. Larraby had been due to telephone him soon, but had preferred to come and see him in person; that could mean only that he did not think it wise to telephone.

Telephones had ears.

"Hallo, Josh," said Mannering, and called up a smile. "Come round instead of telephoning, have you?" He spoke lightly as he opened the door, but didn't step straight inside, just pushed the door wide open and waited; he could not be absolutely sure that there was no one in there.

Nothing happened.

"Let me go first, sir," said Larraby, and he slipped past Mannering and into the hall.

No one was here.

Mannering led the way into the study, opened a small Jacobean court cupboard, took out whisky and glasses and a syphon. Without speaking, he poured out two doubles, squirted soda into each, and handed one to Larraby.

"To all heroes," he said. "Cheers, Josh."

Larraby's eyes lit up.

"Your *very* good health, Mr. Mannering."

"Think I'm in particular need of it?"

"I'm extremely anxious at the moment."

"Why's that?"

"You were quite right, sir."

"So Quinns is being watched?"

"Yes—both from the back and front."

"Yard men?"

"Beyond doubt, sir. Four, in all."

"Oh," said Mannering, and went slowly to the window and looked out. He could see Mickle Street from here and, almost as if the man meant to make sure that he was visible, he could see one of the Yard men standing and smoking and carrying an evening newspaper. "Josh ——"

"Yes, sir?"

"What have we done?"

"It must surely be about Snowy and this Maximilian Gill."

"Seems like it, Josh."

"Sir?"

"How much do you trust Doc Daniels?"

Larraby was obviously startled by the question, and didn't answer at once. Instead he sipped his drink, and seemed to study the pale-yellow mixture, before he looked up into Mannering's eyes again. His own eyes were very light blue, and with his curly hair he looked rather like something

taken from a Michelangelo group, and given flesh and blood.

"If you had asked me that this morning, I would have said that I trusted him absolutely," he answered. "In fact, if it weren't for the fact that you appear to have some doubt as to his integrity, I would still say so. He has had a very difficult time since things went amiss with him, but as you know I have had similar experiences myself. That is why I have always tried to help him. What makes you ask that question, sir?"

"He was looking after Gill," said Mannering.

Larraby's shoulders seemed to straighten themselves, as if to meet a threat.

"*Was*, sir?"

"Yes. Gill's dead," said Mannering, abruptly. "If I'd turned him over to the police he'd be alive. I didn't make much of a show of this job, Josh."

Larraby didn't speak.

"You'd better know the whole story," Mannering went on, and told his manager briefly. Talking, he studied Larraby's face, and judged that the other's reaction was very much the same as his own.

"If Daniels wanted that money, sir, it hardly suggests that he is expecting to get anything out of this any other way," Larraby said, "and Syd isn't in it for nothing."

"I see your point," said Mannering, and went on: "The police started watching me before Gill was killed. I doubt if they know anything about Gill yet. Any definite idea why they're watching?"

"No, sir."

"Josh," said Mannering, very quietly, "you may not have any idea about that, but there's something on your mind. You didn't make this trip just to tell me that the police were watching Quinns, either. The telephone would have done for that. What's happened?"

Larraby answered quite simply.

"There are two reasons, sir, although I don't think I would have come in person about the first. Not long after you left, I heard that Lady Merrison was dead. She had a heart attack, during the early hours of the morning, sir. And as you are acting for her over the loss of the Midi diamonds, I—well, it creates an odd situation, sir, doesn't it? And I think it at least likely that anxiety over the loss of the diamonds hastened her ladyship's death."

15

REASON?

MANNERING moved to the court cupboard and poured himself another drink. He needed it badly. Larraby's glass was not half-empty, and Mannering noticed that as he sipped his own drink, then lit a cigarette.

Larraby said: "I heard from the housekeeper, who telephoned the shop, sir."

"I see," said Mannering. "What time did Lady Merrison die?"

"About half-past one, I think."

"I see. There's something you probably don't know, Josh."

"What's that, sir?"

"She had no heirs, no family of any kind; she was the last of her line."

Larraby said: "I see, sir."

"She was reasonably well off with the Midis, and almost in penury without them," Mannering went on, as if speaking to himself. "She told me only a few days ago that she hadn't made a will. I told her she should. You know what queer ideas the police get about me sometimes," Mannering went on. This was really a convention between them; neither ever mentioned the Baron, but Larraby knew of the days of the Baron, and all that they implied.

"I know very well," he said.

"They might think that I would be quite prepared to find and keep the Midis for myself, now that Lady Merrison's dead. They might persuade themselves that I knew she was likely to die soon, and decide that I had at least as much right to the diamonds as anyone else."

"Why *should* they think you have them, sir?"

"They know that I often dealt with Old Snowy," Mannering answered. "They are sure that some of the jewels he had at the shop were stolen, and that they'd once been sold through Quinns—they called me in, in the first place, just to identify them. They might think that I'd done a deal with Snowy for the Midis."

"They'd need some reason for thinking that, sir."

Mannering said heavily: "Not just suspicion built on the past?"

Larraby didn't answer.

Mannering finished his drink, lit a cigarette, and went to the window again. The Yard man was still watching from Mickle Street, and the evening seemed to be all eyes. He put a hand on Larraby's arm and led him into the drawing-room and to the window there. The young detective with the boyish smile was now strolling up and down, doing nothing at all to hide the fact that he was here. Two men at least in Green Street, and four watching Quinns.

Why?

Had he found the reason?

"All right, Josh," he said abruptly. "If that's the news you didn't think important enough to make you come in person, I don't know that I want to hear the next. But I suppose I'd better."

"It's even more unpleasant, sir."

"I can believe it. What?"

"We are being searched when we leave the shop, sir," Larraby said quietly. "Old Anthony was first asked if he objected, and he consulted me. I advised him to allow the police to do it. I was also searched."

Mannering's lips were set very tightly, and hardly seemed to part as he said:

"They say what they were after?"

"No, sir."

There were several minutes of such silence that it seemed almost unreal. Larraby did not look away; obviously he did not know what to do or to say. Mannering looked as bleak and as shaken as any man could.

That mood lasted for a long time.

Then: "Josh," he said, in a less-strained voice, "there are one or two things to do. One of Syd's men is upstairs in the studio. He wouldn't talk before I left, but he might be more talkative now. We'll try him, and if he won't come across, we'll hand him over to the police. I could tell them that I'd only just discovered him, couldn't I?"

"I suppose there would be no way of telling how long he'd been here," conceded Larraby, who took the news without batting an eye. "In the studio, is he?"

"Yes," said Mannering. "I'll go upstairs, and you entertain anyone who happens to call. If Jim Ryall comes through switch the call up to me in the studio."

"Very good," said Larraby.

Mannering went up to the studio. He felt deeper misgivings at what was happening, and wasn't sure that he had the right reason yet. Bristow might put a man on to a job based on guesswork, just to follow a hunch, but he wouldn't put six men on unless he felt pretty sure that it was worth while.

Mannering found himself thinking of old Lady Merrison, and her shock and grief at the loss of the diamonds. It was a fact that the thief had virtually killed her. He had killed her in a way which could not be called murder, but there was little real difference.

He reached the studio.

The prisoner had gone.

. . . . .

There were the cords with which Mannering had bound Mason's wrists and ankles, and the cloth which had gagged him. They were cut with a keen knife. Mason couldn't have

done that himself, so someone had come into the flat, found the prisoner, and —

The police must have been watching when it had happened.

There was one weakness about the surveillance of a house where there were several flats: unless they had recognised the man who had come to release Mason, and recognised both Mason and his rescuer when they had left, the police would have no reason to believe that either of them had called at Mannering's flat. No police were in the house, but if Bristow had thought it necessary to watch from a landing, he would have a man there.

So, they were probably looking for a caller who would be recognised.

Mannering bent down and picked up a piece of the rope and examined the cut ends. It was hardly frayed; that showed how keen the knife had been.

Mannering moved all the larger canvases, to make sure that no one else was here and that nothing was hidden, then he went downstairs. The telephone rang. He heard Larraby talking.

Larraby glanced up, looking slightly harassed, but his tone changed as he said:

"Just a minute, Jim, hold on!" He covered the mouthpiece with one hand and looked up apologetically. "I couldn't get an answer from you in the studio, sir, and Ryall's on the telephone. He says that Miss Gill refuses to keep away from her flat any longer, she says that she intends to stay there tonight, and that she insists on seeing her brother. I gather that Ryall is having considerable difficulty."

"I can imagine it," Mannering said dryly. "Is she with Ryall now?"

"He's telephoning from the restaurant where they dined, and I understand that she's waiting near."

"I'll talk to him," Mannering said, and sat on a corner of the desk as he took the telephone. It seemed a long time since the girl had come to Quinns so intense and so determined that she could confide in him only if she felt sure that she could give her brother some grace. There was only one way to make sure that she didn't go hurrying to her flat, and find out what had happened: that was to have her come here, at once.

"Hallo, Jim," he said. "Let me talk to Miss Gill, will you?"

"Yes, right away," said Ryall, with obvious relief. "Half a moment, sir."

There was a clatter of the instrument at the other end being put down, and then Ryall's voice, what seemed a shout of alarm, then silence.

. . . . . .

Jim Ryall was in a telephone booth at the restaurant where he had taken Della to dinner. He had known from the moment he had told her that Mannering did not want her to go back to her flat that she was going to be difficult, and it hadn't been an easy meal. It was made more difficult because he was so attracted by the girl—the temptation to do what she wanted and not to try to make sure that she did what Mannering wanted, was almost overwhelming. But he had argued and pleaded and told her that he was quite sure that if anyone could help her brother, it was Mannering—yet it hadn't been enough. She had only picked at her meal, and when the waiter had brought coffee, she had said flatly:

"It's no use, Jim, I must go and see my brother."

"Well, at least let's talk to Mr. Mannering first," Ryall had pleaded. "That won't do any harm, will it? He wants to see you, anyhow."

He had persuaded her to agree to telephoning Mannering; at first she had waited just inside the booth, but when Larraby had answered instead of Mannering, Della had

gone out of the booth. In his earnestness to make Larraby understand that the girl was set on going home, Ryall hadn't noticed what she was doing.

After Mannering asked to speak to her, he turned round to call her.

She was gone.

He almost dropped the telephone, called out, and then rushed away. This was at one end of the little Soho Restaurant, near the entrance to the cloakroom, and he had thrust a curtain aside and seen the other diners, several waiters, a head waiter cooking something over a methylated-spirit flame—and Della Gill, almost at the door.

"Della!" Ryall shouted. "Della!"

He went rushing towards the door, but everything that could got in his way. A waiter appeared to slip, and blocked his path. A diner shifted his chair back, in Ryall's way. Another waiter dropped a knife, and it clattered in front of Ryall. There was little enough room between the tables, and he couldn't reach the door in time to stop Della from going out. The big window at the far end was covered with a net curtain, and he couldn't see outside. He was too harassed and alarmed to notice the grins on the faces of the waiters and many of the diners, and he made a final effort and reached the door, as a waiter grabbed his sleeve.

"Excuse me, sir, your bill——"

"Be back!" shouted Ryall, and tore himself free.

He pulled open the door and rushed into the street; and at least no one obstructed him here. But there was no sign of Della. A few yards along was a taxi, already gathering speed, and there was little doubt that the girl had jumped into it, that she was already on her way to Clibber Street.

Ryall didn't know what that could mean; he only knew that it was the last thing that Mannering wanted.

16

RUSH

no doubt that Bristow meant to have him fully covered, but would Bristow also have him followed, or was he simply interested in watching the flat and Queen? That seemed of vital importance, and there was no way of being absolutely sure that he was being followed until he had driven some distance. Another car appeared in his driving-mirror, and he put on a burst of speed which left it stumbling. Then he swung right, left and right again, eventually reaching the Chelsea Embankment, and heading for Lots Road and Fulham and Clibber Street. He was much nearer the girl's flat than the girl herself was likely to be, although he had no idea where Rydall had taken her, and could almost certainly be somewhere in the West End. Soon, if he rushed, Jacko Rydall would impress the girl.

Manning warned his driving-mirror.

The car didn't appear again, but there was a time when Bristow's men had been really running. There were traffic lights where the road led into King's Road, and Bristow might assume that if he left the flat he would come either this way or to traffic lights on the Embankment in the other direction. If he had a car at each point of vantage, Bristow could be sure that he was dealing with at least three men.

Manning noticed no one.

He judged that he had at least five and probably ten minutes' lead over the girl, time to get to Clibber Street, talk to Daniels, and make sure that Daniels had got rid of Max Gill's body. If it went according to plan, he would have time to talk to Daniels, leave the flat, and meet the girl in the street.

He had an easy run to Clibber Street, which was near Hurlingham and the river.

He pulled up just outside the house, and saw no men who he felt sure had been sent by Bristow, no one who was lurking. There were no indications that the police were watching here.

The hallway was dark. Radio music sounded loudly in one of the flats, where earlier there had been silence. The timid but curious woman from the second floor showed no interest this time, and her door remained firmly shut. Mannering reached Della's flat a little out of breath. He had made the journey, door to door, in seven minutes.

He knocked, as he had before.

And again there was no answer.

This was the third time he had been here; and the third time that he hadn't met the reception that he expected.

Why didn't Daniels answer?

Mannering took out Della's key, and slid it into the lock making himself move slowly in spite of the almost desperate need for haste. He heard no sound. It was impossible to be sure that when he opened the door he would not face trouble. Mason, for instance, with a knife which he would use more quickly this time?

He opened the door an inch, and called:

"Doc."

There was no answer.

He knew the lay-out of the room, and the only place where anyone could lie in wait for him was behind the door or in the kitchen. He opened the door wide enough to be able to make sure that no one was in the room, then pushed it back violently, so that it would bang against anyone hiding behind it.

It clattered against the wall.

The kitchen-door was open; and no one was inside.

Doc Daniels wasn't here.

Nor was Gill's body.

. . . . .

Mannering looked at the neatly made bed, the tidy room, the fact that Doc Daniels had made quite sure that everything looked normal. Even the cushions on the couch and in an easy-chair had been punched up, much as the girl would

probably do it herself. The cups and saucers had been washed up, and were placed neatly on a large wooden tray. The door leading to the fire escape was locked.

Mannering went back into the big room, bent down, and looked under the bed.

The body of Maximilian Gill was not there, either.

Mannering took a cigarette from his case, lit it, and began to smile wryly. It looked as if Doc Daniels was making sure that he earned his money. There was no point in speculating on how he had managed to get the body out of the apartment, that could come later. Mannering turned the corner of the bed-clothes down, and saw that the Doc had found clean sheets from somewhere; the bloodstained sheets were gone.

They were not in the linen basket.

Mannering's smile grew broader, but he hadn't long to dwell on the ingenuity of Doc Daniels. The girl would not be brought sharply up against the tragedy by finding her brother's body, but she would have to be told, soon unless he was to lie, and tell her that Max had been taken somewhere for safety.

Or, that Max had gone away on his own.

Or, that "Syd" had taken him away.

There was no way of being sure that if he told her the truth she wouldn't go to the police immediately. She couldn't be blamed if she did.

He had to find a way to stop her. He had been here for nearly ten minutes, and at any moment she might come up the stairs.

Mannering went out to the fire escape, but saw nothing there to help. He came back, and examined the ceilings; there was no loft. He opened the front door and looked up at the landing ceiling, and there was the loft hatch, but it had been painted in the past few months, and it was almost certain that it hadn't been opened since; certainly there

were no marks to suggest that Daniels had put the body up there. The walls were freshly distempered, and carried no marks of ladders.

Mannering heard only the sound of radio music, softer up here.

He went back into the flat, lit another cigarette, and tried to make himself forget the girl while he concentrated on the problem: chiefly, that created by the watching police. The more he thought of that, the uglier it looked; six or eight policemen at least watching, waiting as if they were quite sure that he would make a mistake.

He stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette on an ash-tray and lifted the telephone and dialled his flat. Larraby answered almost at once, suggesting that he was still sitting in the study. Mannering sat on the edge of the bed, on the very spot where Max Gill had died.

"Heard from Daniels, Josh?"

"No, sir, isn't he——?"

"No, he's not here," said Mannering. "Send someone to see if he's home, will you?"

"Right away, sir."

"Good. Anything new?" Mannering asked.

"Jim Ryall's here."

"How long's he been there?"

"Three or four minutes, sir."

"Put him on, will you?"

There was only a brief pause, before Ryall spoke, but in that pause Mannering had cause to worry, because Ryall had reached the flat before the girl had reached here, although she must have had a good start on him.

"Mr. Mannering, I can't tell you how desperately sorry I am," Ryall said. "I didn't dream she would run out on me, she'd agreed to speak to you, and—well, frankly, I think that the chief trouble was that Mr. Larraby answered, when she learned that she just turned and ran off."

"All right, Jim, you couldn't hold her by force," Mannering said. "How long a start did she have?"

"Oh—ten minutes or so, I suppose."

"As long as that?"

"Yes, everything went wrong for me," said Ryall, disgustedly. "I chased her across the restaurant, and when I reached the street a taxi was just moving off. She had the luck of old Harry, couldn't have had to wait half a minute for that cab. But when *I* wanted one, I had to wait five minutes or more."

"How much time did you lose at the restaurant?"

"Oh, a few seconds; I shoved three quid into the waiter's hand when he came to the door, and didn't wait for the change. But I didn't get a cab until I was in Shaftesbury Avenue. Had a good run then, though. Mr. Mannering, if there's anything at all I can do——"

"There might be soon. Did Della say she was going straight to her flat?"

"She didn't say anything while I was talking on the telephone, she just mizzled off," Ryall said, "but over dinner she kept repeating that there was no reason at all why she should be kept out of her own flat, and that she meant to talk to her brother. She said there must be some reason you didn't want her to know. I've got to admit that she was pretty difficult. What *can* I do, Mr. Mannering?"

"Just wait there with Josh Larraby," Mannering said. "I won't be long."

He rang off.

He opened the door, and now even the radio downstairs was silent. He had been here for nearly twenty-five minutes, Jim Ryall had had plenty of time, the girl had made it clear that she wanted to come here, and that she wasn't going to let anyone stop her, so:

Why hadn't she come?

Traffic might be fairly heavy, but it hadn't held Ryall up;

and traffic coming out of London at this time of night was usually fairly quick.

He called Max Gill's flat, but there was no answer. After the third vain attempt, he took a last look round the flat and then went downstairs. It was like admitting to a kind of defeat, but he felt convinced, now, that Della wasn't coming. She had been very lucky with a taxi; one had virtually been waiting there for her.

Too lucky?

Waiting for *her*?

He reached the street again, and Larraby's men were here. He spoke to one, who recognised him, and who was quite sure that the girl hadn't come into the street since Mannering had arrived; no taxi had turned into the street, either. There was no point in telling them to stop her from going up to the flat, but Mannering had an uneasy feeling that she wasn't coming.

"When did Doc leave?" Mannering asked.

"Not long before you came, sir. He asked us to give him a hand with a big trunk, and went off in a cab."

"Oh, did he?"

"Hope that was all right, sir."

"Yes, fine," Mannering said. "If you see Miss Gill," he told the man, "go to the nearest telephone and ring me at this number." He handed over a card with the Green Street flat number on it, and added a pound as earnest, and then went to his car. He drove off slowly; even more reluctant to believe that Della wouldn't come.

Had she been prevented from coming?

Or had she been seized with some bright notion, and gone to act upon it?

Mannering drove slowly back to Chelsea. He didn't want to hurry because he wanted to think, without even Larraby to help him. The trouble was that he was always being side tracked.

Why hadn't the girl arrived?

Why were the police watching the flat and Quinns?

Why had Mason carried the Green Street flat key, and how had he got it?

Had anyone got keys to Quinns?

Quinns wasn't so easy to enter; two keys were needed, and the same person never had the two keys. It was just possible that if keys of his flat had been taken and copied the two shop keys had been, too; but it wasn't likely, or so he tried to persuade himself. Lorna, or a maid, might have lost a key. One thing became more and more apparent; the most vital question was why the police were showing so much interest. Until he knew that, he couldn't rest easily.

. . . . .

The police were still in Green Street, but at least they'd taken no action.

He went to his flat, taking the stairs again, still wanting time to try to think. But he didn't have much, for as he reached the second landing he saw a man's feet again. This time they were moving; this time it was young Ryall, running to meet him; and when he saw Ryall's face Mannering sensed disaster.

17

DISASTER

Behind Ryall, standing in the doorway, was Josh Larraby; and for once Larraby called out in a sharp, almost angry voice enough to make Ryall look round.

"Come back at once! Say nothing until Mr. Mannering is inside," Larraby said. There was a whip-like lash in his voice. "Come at once, Jim."

Ryall hesitated.

"Go on, old chap," Mannering ordered, and Ryall bit his lip and turned round. The very way he walked told its own tale of despair. His hands were clenched tightly, as he stalked past Larraby, who moved aside to let him pass. Then he stood in the middle of the hall, and as soon as the door had closed behind Mannering, he burst out :

"Della's been kidnapped!"

Here it was, thought Mannering grimly, and it seemed almost like fate, and the proof of all his fears.

"Della's been kidnapped!"

On Ryall's lips the statement had a touch of horror, and undoubtedly it appalled Ryall. It was easy to understand the impression the girl had made on him, how much he believed that she mattered to him. He was emotionally stretched to his limit, yet had fought back his emotions, and obeyed Larraby.

"Aren't you going to say something?" he demanded harshly.

"When she didn't reach her flat I was afraid of something like that," Mannering said quietly. "Did you notice the taxi she went away in?"

"It was just a taxi."

"Black, blue or brown? New, old? Austin, Beardmore?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, it was just a London taxi," Ryall answered tartly. "It was black, I think. Well, black or dark blue." The questions seemed to have put him off balance; he looked from Mannering to Larraby and back, as if in need of help from one of them; then he demanded in the same harsh voice: "Well, what *are* you going to do? She's been kidnapped, I tell you."

"How did you hear of it?" Mannering asked.

"A man telephoned, and said——"

"A man telephoned," Larraby interrupted in a much quieter voice, and Ryall gave way to him, "a man calling himself 'Syd'. He said that Miss Gill was with him, and that you are not to look for her. He added that he would get in touch with you a little later, and that if you set out to find her, she would not be found alive."

Ryall, his face so white that his eyes showed up like glowing flames, broke in bitterly :

"If you'd only told me there was danger for her I might have saved her."

"I didn't think it would come so quickly."

"Well, you were wrong ! I thought you knew what you were about, instead of that " Ryall broke off, staring into Mannering's face, as if realising that shouting wouldn't help. He steadied his voice as he went on : "Well, what are you going to do, Mr. Mannering? Have you any idea who this Syd is?"

"Not yet."

"Don't forget that he threatened to kill her if you went to the police."

"I don't intend to go to the police yet," Mannering said. "The worry is whether the police will come to us. If they do, and you look as upset as you are now, they'll want to know why."

Ryall became harsh-voiced again.

"Listen, Mr. Mannering, I've a great respect for you, and I know you've done some pretty clever things, but *are* you the right one to try to get Della back? Wouldn't it—wouldn't it be better to go to the police, secretly?"

"It might be."

"Then——"

"But Syd may mean exactly what he said," went on Mannering. "He has killed Della Gill's brother already."

There was a long pause. During it, the colour faded from Ryall's cheeks, even his lips turned pale. The shock of the news seemed to affect his whole body, his shoulders sagged and his arms went limp. Then he stiffened again and actually took a step forward.

"Are you sure?"

"He broke into Della's apartment, attacked a man whom I'd sent there to look after him, and killed Gill."

"Good God!" breathed Ryall, and turned away and began to walk about the lounge hall, as if he could not keep still, and as if he had not the slightest idea what to do or say next. "Good *God*! And she—she was so sure that you were going to help him. She told me what it was all about, she said she was sure that her brother hadn't killed this jeweller, she said that she didn't know anyone else to turn to, that was why she asked you. She was sure——"

He stopped again, facing Mannering squarely. There was more than reproach in his eyes, there was resentment, almost anger.

Mannering didn't try to stop him from going on.

"She was absolutely sure you would be able to help her, and so was I," Ryall said flatly. "She seemed to think you were some kind of God. And now you've let her brother be killed, and you've let her be kidnapped. If you'd told me the kind of thing that might happen, I could have saved her. You let me think that the only thing I had to do was to stop her from going to her brother's flat."

He broke off.

"Jim ——" Mannering began.

"And if anything happens to her, it will be your fault," Ryall went on, in a quieter, angry voice. "How can I be sure that you'll do the right thing? I ought to go and tell the police."

"Nonsense, Jim," Larraby said quietly. "You want a little more patience, and——"

Ryall swung round on him.

"*Patience?* Who let Gill die? Who let Della be captured? Who thought Mannering was so damned almighty that he could handle everything himself? And look at him! All he does is stand there and stare through me. I don't believe that he's heard a word that I've said. Has he? *Has* he? Mannering!" He took two quick steps forward, pushing Larraby aside, and raised his clenched fists. "Have you heard what I've been talking about? Answer me!"

"Jim, we've a grave problem," Mannering said quietly. "We've got to find Della Gill, and we aren't going to find her by losing our tempers or getting wise after the event. A lot of things have happened today, and at first some of them didn't seem to have any connection with the others. But they're all connected, and we have to find out how and why. I don't think Della is in acute danger, I think it's more likely that she's been held prisoner to try to make me do something that this Syd wants. If I can find out what it is in time, there'll be a way of hitting back."

"Do—do you know this Syd?" Ryall asked abruptly.

"No, but I think he's a friend of Gill's," said Mannering. "Did Della give you the list of the names and addresses of his friends, his clubs, all that kind of thing? I asked her "

"Yes, she had it ready," Ryall said, and delved into his pocket for a foolscap envelope, a little creased because it had been there some time; on it was typed, simply: "*John Mannering Esq.*" "But what good will they be?"

"Here's Gill's address book," Mannering said, taking the slim book out of his pocket. "We ought to look through both lists, and make a note of any names or any places which appear in both. Then we need a list of the people whom Snowy knew—his customers and the people he bought from. Can you get that, Josh?"

"I'll get it if it is possible," Larraby said, "but if I may make a suggestion——"

"Yes."

"There's Snowy's sister, who worked in the shop with him, Marion Snow. She kept most of his accounts and sales records, and she probably knows everyone who knew Snowy. If you show her the names that are on both the other lists, that might be quicker than trying to get all the names of people who knew Snowy. We might easily miss the important ones."

"Fine, Josh, and you're right," Mannering agreed briskly. Ryall had taken the envelope and the book and was tearing at the envelope as if he couldn't get it open quickly enough. "Jim, go into the study, sit at a desk, and start checking those two lists. Don't be too impatient, it'll be better to take ten minutes longer than to miss anything."

"All right," Ryall said gruffly, and almost ran into the study.

"If he thinks he's doing something useful it might help him," Mannering said. "Well, Josh, is there anything else?"

He waited for Larraby to answer; it was possible that the man on the telephone had said more than Larraby had told Jim; more than he would be prepared to say in front of the younger man.

"There is nothing else I know of, except that this man Syd convinced me that he really means what he says," Larraby said.

"He means that all right," Mannering agreed. "Did he say anything about the police being outside?"

"No."

"Any specific boasts or threats?"

"No, but he said that he would telephone you again soon, and would have a proposition to put up."

"What was his voice like?"

"Rather rough and husky, sir."

"Could have been disguised, I take it?"

"Quite possibly, sir."

"Did he mentioned the Midi diamonds?"

"No."

"I can't get it out of my head that they're the root cause of this," said Mannering, and then amended sharply: "One of the causes, anyhow. Snowy had them, everything we heard pointed to that, and they were almost certainly stolen last night. They're not at Gill's flat. I've searched it thoroughly, and I don't think there's a chance that he took them there. None of the other missing stuff was found, either. Josh, listen. The police outside are so pleased with themselves they're almost smug. Syd seems to be working to a set plan. Both the police and Syd know what they're about, and we're just being pushed around. If we face up to facts, there isn't another thing we can do until we have that telephone message. I——"

He broke off.

The telephone bell rang.

From the study, Ryall gave a sharp exclamation.

18

PRESSURE

MANNERING went into the study, to see Ryall staring at the telephone as if it would bite him; he hadn't taken off the receiver, and the bell kept ringing sharply. Mannering lifted it, covered the mouthpiece with his hand, and said:

"Jim, get a grip on yourself."

Ryall didn't speak.

Mannering uncovered the mouthpiece, and spoke quite normally.

"John Mannering speaking."

"Hallo, Mannering," a man said in a voice which he recognised immediately. A friendly voice. "What have you been up to?"

"Oh, just work and things," said Mannering. "How are you, Chitty?"

He saw Ryall relax.

"Curious as any kitten," the caller declared. It was Chittering, now of the *Daily Record*, one of the best-known Fleet Street journalists to specialise in crime, and he and Mannering had known each other for many years. "I thought something like this would happen the moment Lorna's back was turned."

"What has Lorna to do with this?" asked Mannering, and he still sounded casual. "What's on your mind?"

"Her grass widowhood after you've been sent to Dartmoor for a long, long time."

"What have I done to deserve it?" inquired Mannering.

Chittering was a man he liked very much; but Chittering in this cat-and-mouse mood wasn't remotely funny. It was

difficult to keep a hold on himself, to speak as if things were perfectly normal.

"I'm not sure, precisely," said Chittering at last, "but I was talking to Gordon of the Yard just now, because I'd been told that the cops were watching Quinns and your flat. Gordon just said: 'None of your business.' But I'd already got something else. There's talk in the East End about a man named Mason who says you were at Snowy's when the old chap was killed. The East End divisional police will have heard about that, and this Mason's wife has been to the Yard."

Mannering felt his nerves tensing.

"That all?"

"Seems plenty."

"Too much," said Mannering. "I wasn't there."

"The police might not believe you. There's more of a different kind, John."

"What?"

"Bristow's had some kind of an accident, and Gordon's taken over. Gordon hates your guts."

"I know how Gordon feels," Mannering said very softly. "Anything else?"

"Glutton! Larraby and the others were searched when they left," Chittering told him. "All very polite, of course, but the impression I had was that the police might not be so polite if they found what they're looking for. Of course, Larraby and the others could have refused to submit themselves to the indignity, but if they had I think they would have been marched to the Yard. Don't you?"

"You could be right."

"I'm so right that I don't think you ought to leave your house or the shop with anything in your pocket that doesn't belong to you," said Chittering earnestly, "even if you're holding it for someone else! That's really why I called, John."

"I gathered that, and I won't waste words telling you I appreciate it," said Mannering. "Thanks, Chitty. As it happens, I haven't anything like that here or at Quinns."

"Sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

"Well," said Chittering, dubiously, "I can't give you chapter and verse, but from everything I've seen and heard, I'd say that the police feel absolutely certain that they've got something on you, and all they need is a little patience to make it stick. Sure you haven't been Sir Galahadding?"

"Not knowingly."

"Don't tell me you do that kind of thing even in your sleep. Listen, John," went on Chittering, and he was very earnest. "I think you're in a serious jam, whether you know why or not."

"I do, too," said Mannering, and glanced at the door, where Larraby was standing; Ryall hadn't shifted his position. "Yes, there is something I'd like you to do."

"Name it."

"I'm going to send you a list of names—some of them with addresses," said Mannering, "and I want you to get in touch with old Snowy's sister, who worked in the shop with him, and find out if she knows any of the people on the list. If she does, let me know."

"When do I get the list?"

"In about half an hour. Will you be at your office?"

"Yes."

"I'll send it by one of the assistants at the shop, you may have met him," said Mannering. "Young Jim Ryall. If he can come along with you, that would probably be a good idea."

"Pleasure provided he'll take my instructions."

"He will."

"All right, John," said Chittering, then went on in that earnest, rather worried voice again: "I hope things don't

go sour on you, but I just don't like this police pressure. You know how it is when one thing misfires, all the rest do, too."

"Which particular thing are you thinking about?" asked Mannering, almost with a feeling of dread.

"Gordon for Bristow," Chittering said. "I never have liked that chip on Gordon's shoulder."

"I won't forget it," said Mannering. "Thanks again, Chitty."

"Be very careful," Chittering exhorted, and rang off.

Mannering found himself lighting a cigarette as he told Larraby and Ryall what Chittering had said. When it was finished, Ryall had regained a little colour, but still didn't inspire much confidence. He sat back in Mannering's chair at the desk, with the address book and the list of names and addresses in front of him, and a blank sheet of paper between them; this was for the names, if any, which appeared in both the book and the list.

"As soon as you've got that ready I want you to take it to Chittering of the *Daily Record*," Mannering told him, "and he'll get all the names checked with Snowy's sister. You heard me say that. All clear?"

"Yes," said Ryall, "but——"

"Let me finish," Mannering interrupted. "It's now clear that I'm being framed. Mason and his wife are in it, and I'm going to see the wife. The whole thing turns on the identity of this Syd. You're not to tell Chittering anything except that I'm interested in a Syd who is probably a first-class screwsman. Chittering will almost certainly ask a lot of questions, and if you tell him anything else and it gets into the newspaper, it might make all the difference to finding Della Gill before any harm comes to her. Understand?"

"Of course I do!"

"The police might search you when you leave here," said Mannering. "Let them, but don't answer any questions, except to say that you're going to see Chittering, and that

I want to try to find out if Chittering can tell me what's happening. That clear, too?"

"Yes."

"Think you can keep your head?"

"I can keep my head and my nerve," Ryall said quietly, "but I can't see that this is going to help, Mr. Mannering. I'm sorry, I don't want to be difficult, but I simply can't see it."

"It might help because of this," said Mannering, answering as if he had expected the question. "Della was kidnapped by the people involved in last night's robbery and murder. Her brother was also involved, remember, and her brother might possibly have the name of his accomplices in his address book. Della prepared that list of people her brother knew, too—and anyone in both lists probably knew Max Gill pretty well. We might have to question a dozen people before we learn anything useful, we might even fail, but we've got to try. It's possible that Gill wouldn't let his sister know about Syd, or his criminal associates, so the best book for Snowy's sister to examine is the address book, although anyone who appears in both lists *might* be worth special attention because they knew Gill well."

"What do we do, if we find someone worth following up?" Ryall demanded.

"You tell me about it at once," said Mannering. "Either you telephone or you come back here. Let Chittering decide. You can trust him, provided you don't tell him any more than I've said. And if he gives you instructions about what to do, you're to obey him without argument."

"All right," said Ryall. "I'll do all I can."

. . . . . .

Ten minutes later, he left the flat, taking both Della's list and the address book with him.

As the door closed behind him, Larraby said worriedly:

"Do you think he will keep his head?"

"I think there's a good chance that he will, once he's over the shock and the disappointment," Mannering said. "He wouldn't have stayed here much longer without working off his energy, anyhow; he needed something to do."

"What happens if he tells the police after all?"

"Short of keeping him here against his will, how could we make sure that he didn't tell them?" asked Mannering, practically. "Think I should have kept him, Josh?"

"Yes."

"They haven't made any move yet, but at any moment the police might decide to come in and search the flat," Mannering pointed out, "and if we had Ryall here drugged, or tied up—there would be a lot of awkward questions, especially with Gordon to deal with. I'd rather take a chance on Jim, and I think he'll be all right. But I'll take one extra precaution. Feel fairly sure that Jim will hold his hand until he and Chittering have been to see Snowy's sister?"

"Oh, he'll do that."

"That's what I think," said Mannering. He sat on the corner of the desk and dialled the *Record*'s number. He asked for Chittering and was put through at once. By then, Larraby was beginning to smile, as if he understood what was in Mannering's mind.

"Chitty?"

"Hallo, John, ready to confess?"

"Yes. But listen first. Young Ryall is on his way to you. He's very edgy. Things haven't gone as well as they could, and a girl he's taken to has vanished. There are dark threats in the air, and Ryall might want to go to the police. If he starts talking about that, and if he tells you anything about this missing girl, or what happened to her brother, sidetrack him, will you? Try to square your conscience and give me a really big build-up, of the 'he-always-gets-his-man' kind."

"In short, keep him away from the police."

"Yes."

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

"What did happen to this girl's brother?"

"Exactly the same thing as happened to Snowy," Mannering said carefully.

"Oh," said Chittering, after a long pause. "I see why he isn't feeling very chirpy. All right, I'll do what I can with him. How long am I expected to stall?"

"About the only certain thing is that this show can't last much longer without coming to a head," said Mannering. "Stall him until dawn, will you?" He was looking at Larraby as he spoke. "If it isn't all over by then, I'll have to take what's coming."

"All right," agreed Chittering. "I get the same impression from the police, too. Tonight or nothing."

Mannering put the telephone down, then went out of the study, saying: "Let's have a look in the street," and stepped into the drawing-room. The brightness of the day was fading, but there was still good daylight. From the side of the window, where they could not be seen by anyone outside, they watched the street.

Ryall appeared and walked almost at the double towards King's Road and the buses for Fleet Street.

"So the police held and searched and questioned him," Larraby said. "If they hadn't, he'd have been gone long ago."

"Getting very tight, isn't it?" said Mannering. "This Mason woman could be deadly." He sat on the arm of a large couch in the graceful, lovely room of maroon and grey, with Louis Quinze furniture, heavy brocade curtains and furnishings, and a carpet which muffled all sound of footsteps. "Josh, you know pretty well everything that's happened by now. First, the rumour that Snowy had the Midis

-you picked up that from one of the East End runners—then the murder and theft, and the Yard called me in. All quite normal, up to that point. Then the girl came to see me, and from that moment on things began to hot up. I'd no sooner tried to cope with one thing than another was thrown at me I've been going so fast that at times I haven't known whether I was coming or going. The attacks on Gill and at the Clibber Street flat, Mason's visit here, the fact that he had a key, the girl's disappearance, the police watch -oh, it's been one thing after another, almost as if——"

He paused.

He watched Larraby, as if he wanted the manager to finish the comment for him; and in fact he wondered whether it appeared to Larraby as it did to him.

Larraby said quietly: "As if you are being deliberately framed."

"That's it, Josh," said Mannering, very softly. "As if I'm being framed. If I am, it's been laid on for some time, and Snowy's death was the chance they'd been waiting for. There's only one other possibility. That I'm being softened up, for blackmail of some kind."

"There's another factor, too," Larraby said.

"Tell me about it."

"It has all happened in one day, but it's obviously been carefully planned," went on Larraby. "It is almost certain that the duplicate of the key of this flat was made some time ago, for instance. I should say that it is all part of a well-planned operation, with you as the victim."

"We agree about that, anyhow," said Mannering. "Give us the motive, and we might be half-way to finding out the rest. Now we've got the police pushing on one side, Della Gill missing so that Syd can push hard from another, and all the time the uncertainty about Jim Ryall. They couldn't have arranged that, too, could they?"

Larraby said, as if startled: "Ryall?"

"This couldn't be an act on his part, could it, to high-pressure me even more?"

"I should be very surprised indeed," said Larraby, dubiously. "I agree that it is just possible, but—when did you think of that, sir?"

"Just this minute."

"I repeat, it's just possible, but I should be very surprised indeed if Ryall turned out to be anything other than an impressionable young man rather disappointed because his idol didn't perform the miracles he'd expected," Larraby said dryly. "Have you no idea at all what's behind it?"

"No, I haven't a clue; Josh, go out, and see what happens. Telephone me as soon as you can, about what questions the police asked, and whether they searched you again. Then go and see if Doc Daniels is home, and find out what happened to Max Gill's body."

"What's on your mind, sir?"

"I should hate the police to search here and search Quinns, and come across that body," Mannering said. "I've looked in the studio, but not in the loft above it. And "

He broke off.

He didn't like the expression on Larraby's face, for his look was not far removed from horror. Larraby also raised his hands, the fingers crooked, as in a form of supplication, and then said in a hoarse voice :

"Just before I left we had a delivery by the Fine Art Carriers, sir, a long box brought in by two men. I assumed that these were the sets of chain mail which you bought at Lynn Hall last week, the shape of the box was rather like a coffin. But the delivery company usually telephones to say if they're coming, and they didn't this time. The van they used was a plain one, too.

"That box——"

"That coffin?" asked Mannering, in a choky voice.

They stared at each other for what seemed a long time,

the consequences of what would happen if the police found Max Gill's body at Quinns affecting them much more than the macabre in the idea.

Slowly, Mannering relaxed.

"Let's hope it's the chain mail," he said, and his voice was still a little unsteady. "The quicker I get over to the shop, the better," he added. "You stay here, after all, and pass on messages to Quinns."

"Wouldn't it be wise to wait a little longer, in case that other message comes from the man Syd?"

"I think I want to see inside that box, first," said Mannering. "I——"

The telephone bell rang again; and startled them, as it had before. Mannering moved quickly towards the study, and when he took the telephone up, Larraby was by the door again, almost as if he had been rooted there since the moment when Mannering had talked to Chittering.

"John Mannering here," said Mannering, with false briskness.

"Well, how about that?" a man asked, in a husky voice. "The great John Mannering himself, eh? How're tricks, Mannering? Syd here."

19

ORDERS

"HALLO, Syd," said Mannering, very gently, 'I was told that you'd be ringing." He waited, holding the telephone very tightly, and motioning to Larraby, who hurried out to the extension in the drawing-room. "I hoped you would be coming round in person, it would be much easier to talk that way."

"I don't want to talk," said Syd, "I want to tell you what to do."

"Or do you mean tell me what you'd like me to do?"

"Amounts practically to the same thing," said the man who called himself Syd. There was little doubt that his voice was disguised. "When you've heard everything you'll know what I mean. Very clever wife you've got, Mannering."

Mannering said: "Yes, haven't I?" but his heart began to beat faster. Surely there could be no danger to Lorna; she was in Paris, and wasn't due home for another week. If this man had managed——

"Very clever indeed," Syd repeated, "she paints a treat, doesn't she? Like to know the one I prefer?"

"Tell me."

"Picture of old Cutts Larby," Syd said. "She must have done that years ago, before he was hanged. I knew old Cutts. When I saw the picture the other day I thought that he'd come back to haunt me, it was so lifelike. Congratulate your wife for me, won't you?"

"I might."

"Well, if you don't think that it's a wonderful likeness of a man whose neck was stretched, go and have a look at it," Syd suggested, and he could not have sounded more ami-

able. "Have a look between the frame and the canvas, too, I'm sure you'll be very interested in the workmanship."

"But how shall I know where to report?"

"I shouldn't worry about that," said Syd. "I always like pretty girls, Mannering. Understand me?"

"I think so."

"You'd better," said Syd, very softly; and he put his receiver down, and the line went dead.

Mannering rang off.

Larraby came in from the other room, but didn't speak.

"Smart, isn't he?" Mannering said abruptly.

"I'm really worried now, sir."

"*You're* really worried!" Mannering managed to grin. "You stay down here, Josh, I'll go and look at that picture."

Mannering went to the loft ladder, seeing the particular picture in his mind's eye. It was one of Lorna's best, yet she disliked it. They had known Cutts Larby some years ago, and she had been struck by his expression and the character in his face, and had painted him up here, in this very studio. Less than twelve months afterwards he had been charged and convicted of the murder of his wife.

Cutts Larby.

There was the portrait. It was really lifelike . . .

Yet Mannering wasn't thinking about the painting as he went to the spot where it stood on end in front of several others. He had been surprised when he had seen it at the front, for Lorna usually kept it out of sight; but she changed the old canvases round so much that he could not be sure whether she had done it or not. And the maid was sometimes careless about putting pictures back in exactly the right place.

This was one of the few framed pictures up here; a year ago it had been on loan to a kind of private Rogues' Gallery, and Lorna had not troubled to take it out of the frame. It was a plain, straight modern frame, not of gilt and intricate

filigree, like so many. Mannering went down on one knee after turning the picture round, and studied the back of the canvas and the frame itself—and he saw a slight mark, not one that anyone was likely to notice on a casual inspection. He pushed at the canvas, and it moved away from the frame a little; he could just see the edge of something white between the wood and the canvas. He took out his penknife and tried to get at it, and soon the paper showed plainly and he was able to get it out.

He didn't open it at first.

Mason, and probably this Syd as well, had been able to come in and out of the flat as they had liked. Mannering didn't relish the evidence that they had been up here, looking at the pictures, and concealing this message; but at least the knowledge proved one thing. Larraby was right: this plot had been in preparation for a long time, and it had been put into operation now for one reason only.

Lorna was not here, and during the day the flat was empty. This was the first time for nearly six months that anyone could have come in and out without difficulty.

Syd had waited patiently.

Now, Mannering opened the sheet of paper. It was thin and flimsy, and the lettering was pencilled in big block capitals, it wouldn't be easy to trace the writer. All it said was:

Come to 30, Lee Walk, West Ken, as soon as you can after this.

He felt as if the pressures were too great; that if Syd could have worked this out so brilliantly, there was little chance of upsetting his plans, but what *were* those plans?

Larraby called up from the flat.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, I'm coming down," said Mannering.

The telephone and the front-door bell had been silent;

that was one good thing. He hurried downstairs, and showed Larraby the note; and Larraby said the obvious thing:

"That address is very near Max Gill's flat, sir."

"One of the big houses on the other side of the road," agreed Mannering. "I shouldn't think they'd be careless enough to tell me where the girl is, but if the kidnapping was an afterthought because the chance arrived, they might have. I could go and look round ——"

"Disguised, you mean, sir?"

"Yes."

Larraby said: "I don't think that would be advisable, Mr. Mannering. They'll be expecting you as yourself, and if they have a visit from someone else they'll realise that he came from you, even if they don't discover that he's there in disguise. If you upset this man——"

"All right," Mannering said. "I'll go and try to see this Mrs. Mason first."

. . . . .

Chittering called, almost as soon as Mannering finished speaking. He had found out where Mrs. Mason lived, and called at her house, in Stepney, but she was not there.

But two plain-clothes policemen were watching the house.

. . . . .

Mannering went to his bedroom, and from the drawer where he had taken the automatic, took out two cylinders, which looked like fountain pens. One, when opened, had a variety of tools, not ink, and the other was a torch.

Mannering hesitated about taking a gun, and then decided not to. He was almost certain to be searched, by Syd and by the police.

Then he went out.

It was nearly dark when Mannering reached the street, and the street-lamps as well as the side lights of cars parked in the road were on. It was much cooler. Two cars were drawn up close to the front door, and when Mannering

appeared the boyish-faced Corran and another man approached him, so that there was no chance of his getting clear of them.

"Hallo, guard doubled?" asked Mannering.

"Yes, sir," said Corran.

"What are you after, a repeat performance?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Mannering said very softly: "What *is* all this, Corran?"

"Orders, sir."

"Am I being charged?"

"No, sir, and I hope that won't be necessary," Corran said; he was as cheerful a liar as one would find in the Force. "It's just that we would like to check what you are taking away with you, Mr. Mannering, but if you'd rather we didn't do this here, then if you'll come along with us to the Yard it won't take long."

"And still no charge?"

"Just for questioning, sir."

"Who's behind all this?" Mannering asked, in the same soft voice. "Is it Gordon?"

"My superior officers, sir."

"Think it would have happened if Mr. Bristow hadn't hurt his ankle?"

"I really couldn't say, sir."

"Then perhaps you can tell me what you're looking for."

"I'm afraid not, at this stage."

Mannering said: "All right, I haven't any choice."

They were even more thorough this time, and when they had finished, showed neither disappointment or surprise.

"Mind if I have another look at your shoes, sir?" Corran asked suddenly.

"Help yourself," said Mannering, and raised his foot, pressing it against the wall. Corran knew his job, made sure there was no false heel or false sole, and then said:

"That's all right, sir, thank you."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, we get used to waiting, sir!"

"So you do," said Mannering.

He had dodged the police last time, and they would be doubly careful this, but it wasn't difficult to shake off a car when you knew it was on your tail. Mannering went to the parking plot, got into the Austin, and was at the corner of the street before he felt reasonably sure that they weren't going to follow him. Either they realised that he would evade them, or else they were interested only in the flat and Quinns. There might be a general call out, for his movements to be watched, of course. He felt more than ever certain that they were after the Midi diamonds, felt more than ever certain that Syd had contrived to use the police to increase the pressure that he was exerting.

How?

By night, Lee Walk was quiet and dark. No police seemed to be about. The street-lamps were poor and sparse. Two or three of the smaller houses had lights at the front windows, but very few of the larger houses had, and these all looked gloomy. Mannering drew up near Number 30. It was tall and narrow, and the only sign of life was in a glow at the fanlight of the front door.

Before he got out of the car, a man appeared, and Mannering sat quite still. Was this a Yard man?

"Mannering?" the man said in a rough voice.

"Yes."

"Wait five minutes before you go to Number Thirty, we want to make sure the cops aren't on your tail."

"All right," Mannering said.

The other walked off.

Five minutes later, he came back and said: "Okay to go," as he passed the car.

Mannering got out and went straight to the front door of Number 30.

He made out the shape of a brass bell push, and the knocker. He rang and knocked at the same time, and nothing happened. He tried again. Two cyclists passed at the back of him, the tyres whirring. Still no sound came from inside the house, it was almost as if he had been brought here as part of the effort to high-pressure and to unnerve him.

Then, a door opened inside. More light showed. A man came briskly towards the door, and his shadow appeared on the fanlight. He stopped, and Mannering heard him touch the handle of the door; a key turned in a lock, and then the door opened an inch; but that was all. No one appeared, but a man said:

"Don't try to throw your weight about, there are several of us here, and we won't object to using a knife."

He opened the door wide, so that Mannering could step inside, but kept behind the door. Mannering went in, and the door closed. Before he could stop them, two men frisked him, obviously searching for weapons; they didn't worry about the "fountain pens". Then one of them ordered:

"Go straight along by the stairs."

There was a flight of narrow steps opposite the front door, and at the head, a door which stood ajar. At the end of the passage, alongside the stairs, was another door, partly open. Mannering went along the passage, for there was no point in arguing, yet. As he neared the door at the end of the passage he noticed yet another, beneath the stairs; and this was also open.

Standing in it was another man.

"Okay, this way," he said.

Mannering had heard that voice before; this was Mason who had been at the flat, the man who had been his prisoner, the man whose wife was reported to have told the police that Mannering had been at Old Snowy's at the time of the murder. Mannering passed him, and found himself at

the head of a flight of steps leading into the cellar, which was brightly lit. He began to go down. At the foot of the stairs there was a faintly musty smell. The paint was flaking off the walls and the ceiling, and there was a lot of dust at the sides; on some of the treads it was possible even to see the imprints of men's feet.

There was another door, leading to the left. That was the only way that Mannering could turn, but the room beyond was in darkness. This was the time when he ought to react, but he had come here believing that Syd wanted to see him, not that he wanted to do him harm—yet.

The man behind him said:

"Okay, inside there."

Mannering gritted his teeth. He hadn't uttered a word since he had passed the front door, and it wouldn't help him to ask questions now. He had no choice but to obey.

He stepped forward, into the darkness, and pushed the door open. As he did so, enough light fell into the cellar to shine upon the girl who was sitting on an upright chair, facing him.

He stopped abruptly.

There she sat, ghostly and still, with her head drooping. She did not seem to be breathing.

20

UNDERSTANDING

MANNERING stood almost as still as the girl. The light seemed to grow brighter, although his shadow was cast over the chair and he could not see Della very clearly.

Then, another light went on in the middle of the cellar.

The girl did not move, or even start.

Mannering studied her, trying to see any indication that she was alive. He thought there was a slight movement at her breast. She was tied securely to the chair, with her arms behind it, and ropes round her waist and over her legs; if she was dead, there would be no reason to keep her like this.

He groped for her right hand, and felt the pulse.

It was beating about as strongly as he would expect in a girl who was simply in a drugged sleep.

Then a man said from behind him :

"It wouldn't take much to kill her, Mannering — no more than it took to kill her brother."

The husky voice was Syd's.

Mannering said slowly: "That's one thing I agree about." He schooled himself not to move too sharply, and turned round slowly — expecting to see the speaker. Instead, he saw the door, nearly closed. It had been pushed to from behind him, after the light had gone on, and the speaker stood hidden on the other side.

"Don't come any nearer," the man warned, "just listen to me, Mannering. That girl hasn't a chance of staying alive if you don't do what I tell you."

Mannering didn't speak.

"And you won't stand a chance of staying out of prison," Syd went on. "Don't get this wrong, Mannering, I'm dead

serious. I've been planning this for a long time, and when the girl came to you and you started your lone-wolf act, you played right into my hands. Just do what you're told and you can take it easy for a while."

Mannering said: "Why keep stalling?"

The door seemed to open a little more, as if Syd had touched it, and Mannering actually heard him draw in his breath.

"All right, Mannering. When I first planned it I just wanted my pick of your stock, but the price has gone up, it's too good a chance to miss. I want a half-share in Quinns."

. . . . .

There was no sound at all when Syd finished; nothing showed that he was still there. There was the chill cellar, the bright light and the girl sitting behind Mannering, unconscious.

"Hear that?" the man said again. "I want a half share in Quinns."

. . . . .

Mannering didn't answer.

A half share in the most famous business of its kind in London, perhaps in the world. A half share in a business which had great profits, which had its agencies all over the world. A half share in a stock of precious stones, *objets d'art* and antiques which were worth a fortune.

A half share.

Mannering said, at last:

"And what happens to the other half?" He tried to make the question sound quite normal.

"You keep it. You run the business, as usual. You just have a sleeping partner, and pass on half of everything, month by month. That's all."

"*All*," Mannering echoed.

"It's worth it," said the man, who called himself Syd. "It's worth it just for that girl's life, if half of what you say is

to be taken at its face value, but I wouldn't like to trust you on that. It's worth a lot of other things, Mannering. If you don't agree, you'll find yourself in dock, with a hell of a lot of charges against you which you can't dodge. One charge will be complicity in the murder of Maximilian Gill. Another will be conspiracy with him to rob Arnold Snow. Another will be complicity in the murder of Snow. Want yet another? The possession of precious stones, knowing them to have been stolen -I mean the Midis of course. Some of the Midi diamonds are at Quinns now, Mannering."

Mannering drew a sharp breath.

"The others are in your Chelsea flat," Syd went on, speaking very slowly now, as if he relished every word that he was saying, and knew that there was no way in which Mannering could fight back. "I won't tell you where. I won't tell the police where, either, but if they move in they'll search and find them. They'll find Max Gill's body, too, under a suit of chain armour in a box that Larraby accepted at Quinns this afternoon. Smart, aren't I? I know you often get chain armour, you've American customers for it, and I knew who delivered most of it to you. The rest was easy."

Mannering felt icily cold, quite convinced that this man told the truth. He wanted to speak, wanted to ask questions, but could not; and it was better to let Syd think that he was being wilfully silent, than to start something which he couldn't finish.

"Hear me, Mannering?" Syd asked sharply.

"I can hear you. What makes you think the police will believe——?"

"They'll believe the evidence," Syd said roughly. "Mason's wife's made a good start, maybe you've heard about that. Mason's getting out of the country when he's done this job, and his wife will join him later. She's got the police sitting pretty for you. But that's only the beginning, Mannering. Know old Snowy's sister?"

Mannering didn't speak.

"Marion Snow's a greedy old bitch," said Syd, "and she never had any love for her brother. She'll name you, Mannering, she'll say she saw you at the shop last night. I've only to say the word."

Mannering said quietly: "She'll have a job to explain why she didn't say so earlier."

"Oh, no, she won't—she'll say that you threatened her," Syd sneered. "It's all sewn up, Mannering. You haven't any choice but to do what I want. Right?"

"It seems right."

"It *is* right," Syd said with absolute certainty. "Like me to tell you some more? Don't move, now, just listen to me. For one thing, your fingerprints were found at Snowy's place on things you didn't touch when you went there to help the police. That's the first thing that puzzled the cops. They were on oddments bought from Quinns which you'd handled, and I planted them on Snowy. See how that looks?"

"I can see," Mannering said again.

He felt as if he was gripped in a vice, but his mind was working fast. At least he knew the worst, knew exactly what he was up against.

"There's plenty more," Syd said smoothly. "There's enough evidence at Della's flat, even though it's covered up now, for the police to prove that Gill was killed there. The body will be found in the box delivered to you at Quinns. The delivery people will say you telephoned the order, they'll swear it was your voice. I imitated your voice, so they won't really be lying. That's a murder rap, Mannering, and it's one you couldn't dodge. Tell you another thing. In case you get a chance, and think of killing me, I've put a note in with that body—a note from Snow's sister, promising you that she won't go to the police. You might try to persuade the judge and jury that it's a fix, but you wouldn't have a chance in hell."

"You might have made a mistake," Mannering said at last.

"I don't *make* mistakes."

"If I'm charged with any of these things and found guilty, I can't run Quinns," Mannering pointed out mildly. "Quinns belongs entirely to me. In my will, it is left to my wife. If I were to go to prison for——" He didn't finish that, but went on quickly and abruptly: "What I'm telling you is that you have made a mistake, Syd. Even if under remand, I'd have my solicitors and my legal representatives with me. I'd protect Quinns in such a way that it couldn't possibly be any use to you. I'd protect it in such a way that it would be useless to try to work the same trick with my wife, too. So where does this get you?"

"This is where it gets me," Syd went on in the same matter-of-fact voice, "it gets me to a half-share. Because the police have been tipped off by Mason's wife that the Midis are at Quinns or your flat, and that you're going to sell them tonight. They want to pick up the buyer as well as you, that's why they're waiting until midnight before they move in. They've been told that your buyer's due before midnight. Between now and eleven o'clock they've got to be drawn off, or else they'll find the Midis and the body. Add that to Mrs. Mason's statement and what Snowy's sister will say, and that'll be the end to Mannering *and* Quinns."

He stopped, and the silence seemed filled with menace, until Mannering broke it stiffly.

"How do you intend to draw them off, even if I say I'll do what you want?"

"Oh, I can draw them off," said Syd. "I haven't gone into this with my eyes shut. And let me put you right on another thing, Mannering. There's no question of you *saying* you'll do what I want; you'll do it. You'll stay here until we've visited Quinns together. I'll get impressions of all your keys and locks, I'll check the stock, and get everything

under control. Then we'll enter into a deed of partnership. One of the big banks will act for my nominees, you'll pay my share into the account. And directly you try any tricks, Snowy's sister will turn in her evidence. You just haven't a chance unless you play this my way, Mannering, because I've got you exactly where I want you. I knew I couldn't fail, this was the chance I'd been waiting for. You always did prefer your lone-wolf act to calling in the cops."

Mannering said, in a hard voice: "What happens if the police aren't called off?"

"We both lose, but you lose a lot more than I do," Syd said. "I lose the Midis, which are too hot anyway, and a lot that I didn't have, you lose everything that you've got in the world. Get things straight, Mannering. I wore a beard at Snowy's, his sister doesn't know I was there. Mason's fixed her. And get some other things straight. I'll kill, if I must. I killed Gill because he realised who I was. When I had a fight with him at Snowy's place he must have got a better look than I thought. To save myself, I'll kill again."

"You didn't have to hurt his sister."

"I had to get her away from you," Syd said. "I had to make sure she didn't go to her flat and then on to his, and make trouble because her brother was missing. That's as important to me as it is to you. I want to pull this thing through, Mannering, but I'll kill you or anyone to save my own neck. I'll call the police off, if you'll play; that's in the bag."

"In the bag," he repeated very softly.

"Like *you*.

"Think it over, Mannering."

Then he pushed the door to, and Mannering heard the key turn in the lock, and knew that he was to stay down here until he had made up his mind what to do.

Syd felt sure what that would be.

Mannering glanced at his watch. It was after nine, so he

had three hours at most—three hours, to achieve the impossible. Even if he could walk out of here now, he would have a slim enough chance. But he was locked in with the girl.

He turned round to look at Della Gill. She hadn't moved. If he could forget her pallor, he could think of her as truly beautiful; it was easy to see what Jim Ryall saw in her. But she looked as if she was likely to stay unconscious for several hours yet—until after twelve o'clock, after the time when the police moved in to make their raid and to find the diamonds and the body.

He would have to let them move in.

It would be impossible to do this deal with Syd; right out of the question. There might be a chance in a thousand of convincing the police, or later a jury, that he had been framed, if he stopped at this. Once he submitted to Syd, he wouldn't have a chance in the world. Submission was literally unthinkable, so——

There were three hours.

Abruptly, the light in the cellar went out, and he was in the dark silence.

Syd's husky voice came as if from a long way off.

"Make up your mind, Mannering, you haven't much time left."

. . . . .

He had to get out of here.

That was the first essential.

. . . . .

Mannering took a pencil torch from his pocket, and shone it about the cellar. Its light touched the girl's hair, and then brushed over her face; she still didn't stir. He looked about the walls, shining the light up and down, looking for cracks or anything which might suggest structural weakness, and saw none. The thin pencil of light was not enough, and yet he had to make it do. He began to shine it on the ceiling, letting the little round ball of light travel to and fro slowly;

if there was a large crack this would show it; but he saw none. It must have taken him at least ten minutes before he was sure that the walls and the ceiling were intact; there was a small ventilation hole in one corner, but it wasn't large enough to squeeze through, it wouldn't even have been large enough for Della Gill, had she been conscious.

There was Della.

Remember *Della*.

Even if he could get away from here, he couldn't leave her, he would have to take her.

He went to the door.

It was an old lock, and not difficult to open. He doubted if they thought him expert enough to do it; they might feel that they could safely leave him down here, without a guard. He took the picklock from the fountain-pen kit and placed the torch in a position from which it shone obliquely on to the keyhole, but the light would not shine through. Then he began to work.

He hated making the slightest sound, but he had to make some; just a faint scratching. If anyone was immediately outside the door they would be bound to hear it. He heard nothing and the door didn't open. So he worked on.

Soon the lock clicked open.

This was child's play, but—what lay beyond? Would Syd be careless enough to leave him down here alone, for long?

He turned the handle and pulled the door open an inch; light shone through. He opened the door another inch, so that he could see into the little passage beyond and halfway up the stairs.

No one was there.

He opened the door wide; and there was no sound.

He closed it again, swiftly, and went back to the girl. He groped for the ropes, found them, shone the torch on them and then cut the cords; in two places he scratched her wrists.

When she was free, she lolled forward helplessly. He raised her to his shoulders, and went to the door again. He opened it an inch, then heard a man say clearly :

"No, don't talk to him, just see what he's doing."

"Okay," another man said.

There were footsteps on the stairs; one man's footsteps. The one who had first spoken was still upstairs, and wasn't likely to be watching; he would feel secure enough for the moment if one man was coming down to check on Mannering.

When this man turned the key in the lock, he would find that there was no resistance; the moment he realised the significance of that, he would raise the alarm. At most, Mannering had a few seconds to deal with him, and success or failure would depend largely on the man's quickness of mind. Some men would realise what the unclosed door meant on the instant; others would take several seconds to realise it.

Syd would have no time lag.

Mannering closed the door without a sound, and the noise of the other's footsteps was cut off. He put Della down, and stood close to the wall by the side of the door. The key would be pushed in, and turned, and the natural thing after that would be for the man to thrust the door open; or at least, to open it an inch or two.

Would he put on the light first?

He did.

Mannering narrowed his eyes against it. He couldn't be sure that he would hear the key being inserted, couldn't be sure that the first sound wouldn't be a shout of alarm.

The handle turned.

The door opened. . . .

Mannering yanked it wider open, fiercely. Mason stood there. Mannering drove a fist into his stomach with terrific force, heard a whining gasp, then struck him savagely be-

neath the chin. Mason's eyes rolled. Mannering opened the door wide and stopped him from falling, then dragged him into the cellar. He spared precious time, to gag him and tie his wrists, then to push him into a corner. Moving with desperate speed, Mannering went to Della, picked her up, and opened the door wide and stepped through.

The staircase was empty, but the steps were of stone, it would be easy to make a lot of noise. He went up one at a time. By the time he reached the top, Della Gill was very heavy, but he didn't put her down. The door underneath the stairs stood wide open, and he could hear voices from the right –probably the kitchen and could smell tobacco smoke. He stepped into the passage and turned left towards the front door, and he held his breath, almost afraid to breathe.

If he could get outside, his car was only a few yards away.

Then footsteps sounded above his head; a man was coming towards the head of the stairs.

21

SYD

The man above Mannering's head walked briskly. There was a light on at the landing, and he left it on. As he started down the stairs his shadow was cast on to the passage and on to the closed front door; he looked very tall. He could not see Mannering until he reached the foot of the stairs and turned towards the kitchen and the kitchen-door was nearly closed.

Voices came from it; at least two men were in there.

Two, there; one, coming the stairs; and Mason in the cellar. Would there be more than four men here? Four should be ample for Syd's needs.

Mannering edged towards the door beneath the staircase, and backed inside. He put Della on to a chair. The light was below and did not cast a shadow. The man coming down seemed to be walking so heavily that at any moment he would come through the treads, but suddenly the noise he made slackened; so he was at the foot of the stairs.

He turned this way.

The other two men were still talking.

Mannering stood motionless, with his hands raised a little, and his heart thumped. The other man drew within a few paces. If he glanced towards the cellar as he drew level, he would have that split second of warning that he needed, would have time to shout even if he had no time to defend himself.

He came in sight.

It was Doc Daniels.

. . . . .

As he came in sight, Daniels was staring at the door; and instead of glancing towards the cellar door, he paused, almost opposite it, and obviously he was listening to what the two men were saying. It couldn't have mattered less—just talk about current racing form.

Now, Mannering moved.

Daniels must have seen the movement out of the corner of his eye, for he glanced round. He would expect to see the man who was now in the cellar, and there was no reason at all why he should expect danger. On the instance, his mouth dropped open and his eyes rounded, almost as if someone had pulled a string.

Mannering's fingers closed round his throat, and squeezed.

Daniels gave a choking gasp.

Then he tried to strike and kick out, but the pressure at his throat was tight and savage; and Mannering could see the fear in his eyes. It was a fear that was good to see; fear such as this man had caused in others. Daniels' strength seemed to ebb, there was no vigour in his blows or in his kicks. His chest heaved as he struggled to breathe but could not. He began to sway a little, and his eyes closed, opened again, then closed. He might be foxing, but he wouldn't fox for long.

Mannering could have killed him.

There he was, the killer of Max Gill, the kidnapper of Della, the killer of Old Snowy; and he was quite helpless. If Mannering kept the pressure up for another half-minute, he would probably never breathe again.

He *ought* to die.

His body went limp, and when he felt sure that he was not pretending, Mannering loosened his grip and lowered Daniels to the floor. For those few seconds all he had been able to think about was Daniels, his hatred for the man and his treachery; and that had made him oblivious of the other

dangers. Now they came crowding back. He'd made little noise, but some had been unavoidable, and now there was silence in the kitchen, too.

The talking had stopped.

He heard nothing; no creaking chair, no footsteps, no casual word.

He bent down over Daniels, staring up at the kitchen-door as he did so, and began to feel Daniels' pockets. If he had a gun, surely he would be carrying it now, and if he had a gun——

Mannering touched it, in the hip pocket, took his gaze off the door for a moment while he got it out—and as he pulled, the kitchen-door opened and other man stood there with a gun in his hand.

Mannering had Daniels' gun in his right hand, now, but the other had the advantage. Mannering flung himself backwards. The other fired; there was a flash and a sharp report. Mannering raised his gun as the man fired again, and two shots ran out simultaneously.

The man in the door cried out, and dropped his gun. Mannering leapt forward and flung the door back and then he stopped, with a strange relief, for there was no danger here.

The man inside was standing against the kitchen dresser, his hands up in surrender even before he saw the gun.

. . . . . .

"How many of you are here altogether?" Mannering asked roughly.

"F-four."

"That all?"

"Yes, I swear it, f-f-f-four!"

Mannering swung round on the man in the doorway, who was clasping his injured arm, and trying to get as far away from Mannering as he could.

"That true?"

"Yes, it——"

"Is Doc Daniels known as Syd?"

"Yes."

"Did he kill Snowy?"

"Yes!"

"How was he going to call the police off Quinns and my flat?"

The man near him opened his mouth but didn't speak; it was the other, still standing by the dresser, who gasped a kind of answer.

"We—we—we don't know."

"Don't stall. How was he going to call them off?"

"I tell you we don't know," the man cried. "He wouldn't tell us, there were a lot of things he wouldn't tell us, we just took our orders. That—that's the truth. Archy, tell him, that's the truth!"

The man in the doorway muttered agreement, and Mannering believed that they were telling the truth; that was the kind of secret that Daniels would keep to himself. If these men wouldn't or couldn't talk, he would have to work on Daniels. There was nothing that he wouldn't do to Daniels to make him talk — and no way of being absolutely sure that he could make him.

He glanced down at the man, who hadn't moved.

"All right," Mannering said, and raised his gun. "Get downstairs into the cellar, and hurry."

It didn't take long.

There was more rope in the cellar, and he bound first one then the other, pushed them inside, and locked the door on them. When it was done, he turned and hurried up the cellar steps. Behind him was a triumph enough to turn a man's head, but he hardly gave it a thought. There were still two major obstacles, and each might be insuperable; one was Daniels himself, and the other was calling the police off.

Della was still huddled in a corner.

He passed her, stepped to Daniels' side, and went down on one knee. The man was still as death. Had he squeezed too hard? Was it possible that he had killed the man, and so destroyed his only hope of finding out how Daniels had intended to call the police off? He had felt absolutely sure that he could do that, there had been no doubt in his mind.

He was so still.

He was dead.

. . . . . .

At first Mannering was robbed of all thought by the shock of this discovery. He felt Daniels' pulse, and there was no sign of life, there was no doubt at all of death. So he had squeezed too hard; that rage which had possessed him when he had attacked the man had been murderous, and——

No, it hadn't.

There was blood on Daniels' waistcoat, and Mannering realised in that instant what had happened. Daniels' man, shooting at Mannering, had killed his own boss.

. . . . . .

Mannering stood up slowly and stiffly.

He did not lose any time, but could not make himself move or think quickly yet, and he fumbled in his pockets for a cigarette. At first all he could think of was the possibility that the men in the cellar could tell him what he needed to know, but he told himself that it wasn't likely, that had either of the first two known they would have talked, for they had been so frightened of his gun.

"No good," he said aloud. "Won't do."

He stared at Della.

"Well, you're alive," he said, in a hard voice, and drew heavily on the cigarette. "I wonder——"

He broke off, and glanced at his watch.

It was twenty minutes to ten, and that left him two hours

and twenty minutes; in two hours and twenty-one minutes precisely, the police would move in, and would find the body and the diamonds; add those to Snowy's sister's statement and Mrs. Mason's tale, and he might be damned.

How had Daniels——?

The cigarette was already half smoked. Mannering looked at the glowing tip, then turned slowly.

There might be something in the house that would tell him what he needed to know; some clue which would talk for the dead man. In any case, there were things here which he needed to find. He turned to the stairs, for Daniels had been up there, it would be as well to start there. He went up, slowly. The lights were still on. Belatedly, he reminded himself that neighbours might have heard the shooting, but there had been no alarm — probably the fact that it had been in the passage, and in the middle of the house, had made it almost inaudible to the people on either side.

A door opposite the head of the stairs was wide open.

He went in.

There wasn't much *time*. He found papers, which gave some details of his, Mannering's movements during the day, a kind of diary which, once in the hands of the police, would give them a lot more to go on. There were some of the other jewels which had been stolen from Old Snowy's place, a list of the names and addresses of all the staff of Quinns, including Larraby. In a small diary was a note that Lorna would be going to Paris—and with it a cutting from a newspaper which had announced the trip. There were pencilled notes, showing that the maid had been questioned—probably without having the slightest idea why.

But there was nothing to suggest how Daniels had intended to call the police off.

Mannering finished his search of the room, and looked at his watch again. It was five past ten.

Even if he managed to get in and out of both Quinns and

the flat with the Midi diamonds, there was the body to dispose of.

He couldn't get out with the jewels, anyhow, that was just wishful thinking.

He went into a small empty bedroom, then into a large bedroom. Daniels' clothes were on the foot of the bed, and on a large table was a recording unit. That wasn't all. Built into a large cupboard was a radio transmitter, the kind used by radio hams throughout the world. By it, were some details about the way broadcasts were made from Scotland Yard.

This was it.

Daniels had proposed to call the police off by a faked broadcast.

. . . . .

The means of calling off the police were there.

But Mannering could not operate this transmitter, he knew nothing at all about radio.

. . . . .

There must be a way.

Daniels had meant to impersonate the officer at the Information Room at the Yard, over the radio.

Impersonate.

That was it!

He could impersonate Gordon. . . .

No, Gordon was too thin; but Bristow was a man whom Mannering knew so well that he could imitate his voice, his mannerisms, even his walk.

First, burn these papers.

Then get to Victoria, and make-up.

22

THE IMPERSONATION

At exactly twenty minutes to eleven, Mannering turned into Green Street, sitting in the corner of a Wolseley, the model of many police cars, with a private-hire driver who had no idea of what Mannering was planning to do. As the car drew up outside the entrance to his house, two men approached Corran and the other man who had searched him. Possibly the watch had been tightened, and they were checking everyone who went in as well as those who came out.

Mannering's driver jumped out.

"Passenger's hurt himself," he said laconically, and opened the door, while Corran peered inside but did not immediately see who it was. Mannering edged himself towards the door and into Corran's arms. He had dressed in a grey suit kept at the lock-up garage, for Bristow always wore light grey, and had put on a smart new trilby hat, Bristow's favourite. He looked like Bristow, pale with rather even features, a neat appearance, but he wouldn't be able to stand the test of close scrutiny in a searching light. Full success or utter failure depended only on one thing, that he could keep in the shadows.

He grunted as he got out.

Corran was staring in puzzlement—and if Mannering fooled Corran, then he would have a fair chance of fooling the others. The light was poor, but Corran would carry a torch.

"Who's who's in charge?" demanded Mannering, and then winced as he put his left foot to the ground. It was heavily bandaged, and a carpet slipper poked from the bandages. "Who—you, Corran?"

Corran backed away smartly.

"Yes, sir! Glad you're about again, I was told "

"Damn fool doctors," said Mannering, in Bristow's brisk, crisp voice. "Mannering in?"

"No, sir, only Larraby."

"Oh, Larraby. Have you tried to make either him or Mannering talk?"

"No, sir, my orders were just to search everyone who comes away from the flat. We've had two rather unpleasant incidents. Mr. Mannering's neighbours resented it, and they're at the Yard now, sir, but that's all."

"I see. All right, Corran." Mannering looked along the lighted hallway, and scowled. "Weeks since I've been here. I don't know that I can make those stairs, you'd better tell Larraby that I want to talk to him."

"Yes, sir, but there's a lift."

"Eh?"

"Newly installed, sir."

"Oh, good," said Mannering, "then I'll go up and talk to him. Lend me a hand, will you." He leaned heavily on Corran's arm until they reached the lift, and then he said: "I'll manage from here on. Don't relax precautions, even if someone comes out while I'm there. Mannering might be using neighbours as dupes."

"Very good, sir."

Mannering grunted.

He stepped into the lift, and the doors closed. He wiped the perspiration off his forehead and leaned against the side of the lift, seeing Corran's face in his mind's eye. The sergeant had been so startled that he seemed to have done nothing but stare, and he might have a belated suspicion that he hadn't been talking to Superintendent Bristow.

The lift stopped.

Mannering went to the door swiftly, and rang the bell—and heard a movement inside almost at once. It wasn't

Larraby, but young Ryall, anxious and worried. Ryall started back when he saw a man who seemed to be a complete stranger. He had never seen Superintendent Bristow, but Larraby knew the Yard man well and Larraby, just behind Ryall, kept a completely straight face and said:

"All right, Jim, it's Superintendent Bristow. Good evening, Mr. Bristow, I'm afraid Mr. Mannering is out."

"Want to talk to you, Larraby," said Mannering, and he moved forward, under their eyes. When the door closed, Larraby was frowning as if puzzled, and Mannering said in his normal speaking voice:

"Well, if I can fool both you and the chaps downstairs, there's a good chance. Jim, news for you—Della Gill's all right. She's been doped, and I left her at a nursing home and promised I'd get in touch with her in the morning. She isn't badly hurt."

Ryall gasped: "Who—who—who——?"

Larraby said swiftly and in great relief: "Mr. Mannering! Do you know——?"

"Everything," Mannering said, "and we've got to beat our own record for speed. In an hour and ten minutes the police will raid this flat and Quinns. We've got to find the Midi diamonds and get Max Gill's body out of Quinns before the raids. Some of the diamonds are here and some at Quinns, so——"

"Do you mean it? Della's safe?" Ryall breathed.

"Probably safer than you are," Mannering said. "You're going home right away, or else you're going to risk getting yourself in trouble with the police. My advice is to go home."

"Where is Della?"

"Josh, the most likely place for the diamonds is up in the studio, that's where they hid the message," said Mannering, hardly pausing. "If we find some of the stones up there, they should be all we need here—a few odd stones of the same

dimensions won't prove one thing or another. Come on, Jim, are you——?"

"I'm staying with you!"

"Fine! Go into the kitchen, and search every tin and packet for diamonds. Try not to make too much mess when you're running your fingers through the flour! Check the salt-cellars, pepper-pots, everywhere they might have hidden the things. If the police come in while the stones are still here, I probably won't be able to talk myself out of it. Josh, you and I will go upstairs."

He led the way; and Larraby almost fell as he hurried to climb into the studio.

"I won't worry you with questions now, sir, but——"

"Our Syd was Doc Daniels," said Mannering. He was already on one knee beside a framed picture, holding a small hammer with which to knock the wooden supports out, and to look inside. "Exactly when did Doc appeal to you for help?"

"About four months ago, I should say. He said that he would be grateful if you or I—but *Daniels*, sir!"

"Hard, isn't it? From records at his house, he's been plotting this for several months, so when he first asked for 'help' he had it all in mind. He'd know that if anyone got hurt and we wanted to cover up, we'd probably send for him. Crafty devil. He's dead, Josh."

Larraby flinched.

"You didn't——"

"One of his own men shot him accidentally. Get that frame off while I look inside this one."

The best place here for hiding jewels or small objects was just inside the picture-frame where the canvas, stretched over its wooden stretcher, fitted into a kind of slot on three sides. Of the dozens of pictures here, only seven were framed, and only four of the seven framed in a way which allowed small objects to be hidden.

It was Larraby who exclaimed :

"Here's something!"

. . . . .

It was more than "something"; it was at least two-thirds of the stones of the Midi diamonds, taken out of their settings, shimmering and scintillating in the light.

They were packed in cotton-wool; a fortune in money and superbly beautiful.

"I'll take these," Mannering said, and dropped them into his pocket. "You'd better come with me to Quinns, Josh; Jim can stay here and keep an eye on things and take messages." He was moving towards the ladder as he spoke, and lowered himself and jumped down, while Larraby was scrambling cautiously over the edge of the studio hatch.

Ryall was in the kitchen, his clothes smeared with flour, and a dab of white at the end of his nose

"I can't find——" he began.

"We've found what we want," said Mannering quickly. "Now we're going to Quinns, and we want you to hold the fort here. How did you get on with Chittering?"

"Seemed a decent chap," said Ryall, with unconscious condescension, but obviously he wasn't really thinking about Chittering. "You've got everything that might be dangerous here?"

"I think so."

"You don't want me to search for anything else?"

"No, Jim, but "

"Then must I stay here?" pleaded Ryall "I'd like to go to this nursing home, and see Della, and——"

"I'd much rather you didn't until you get a telephone call from Josh or me," said Mannering. "We may find ourselves in a jam." He stared into Ryall's bright, anxious eyes, understanding something of his mood; it would be much better for Ryall if he had something to do.

"In fact, we need you near Quinns," Mannering decided

quickly. "Leave here ten minutes or so after us, and let the police search you. Tell them you're going home, but get a bus or a taxi and go to Bond Street, near Hart Row. There's a late-night café there, and there'll be other people about. Just wait for us."

"Right!" Ryall said. "I couldn't possibly wait here doing nothing."

"Fine. By the way, were any names on all three lists?"

"No," said Ryall, and Mannering wondered if he knew that he'd studied those lists simply to give himself something to do.

. . . . .

Downstairs, Corran obviously had no suspicions at all, and when Mannering and Larraby appeared, he actually moved to the hired Wolseley, and opened the door. Larraby got in first, and Mannering said in the crisp, authoritative voice which was so well known as Bristow's at the Yard.

"I'm going to Quinns. Is Mr. Gordon there, do you know?"

"I think so, sir."

"Right. Move into the flat, as arranged, at midnight."

"Yes, sir."

"There's the key," "Bristow" said. "I showed Larraby the search warrant, and he realised that it isn't any use holding out. But——"

"I am *quite* sure you will find no stolen goods of any kind in Mr. Mannering's flat," said Larraby firmly, "and if he were here, I've no doubt that he would be quite happy to give you a key."

"Oh, would he," said Mannering, and winked at Corran. "We'll see. There's a young chap upstairs name of Ryall. Make sure he isn't sneaking out with anything. I think he's going home."

"Right, sir."

"Good," said Mannering. "What do you make the time?"

"Twenty minutes past eleven, sir."

"Good," Mannering said again. "All right, good night."

Corran stood back and saluted.

Mannering kept a completely straight face until they were at the corner of Green Street, and turning into King's Road. Then he relaxed, lit a cigarette, and wiped his forehead again, but he was feeling more on edge than ever. Only one obstacle lay ahead; by far the most dangerous. Gordon was a much more deadly adversary than Corran, and was almost Bristow's equal in rank. It wouldn't be so easy to get into Quinns as it was to get into the flat.

He'd have to talk more to Gordon, too; show a fuller knowledge of what was going on, and try to find that convincing reason why Gordon should stay outside.

Could he pull it off?

. . . . .

The big hired Wolseley was stopped at the entrance to Hart Row by a policeman in uniform. Several men in plain clothes were in the doorways of the narrow, ill-lit street; obviously this was where Gordon had decided to concentrate his men. The policeman recognised "Bristow" and let him pass; and as the car stopped outside Quinns, Gordon himself came across.

"Hallo, Gordy," Mannering said, and grunted. "Lend me a hand, will you?"

"Bill!" Gordon exclaimed.

"Couldn't rest happy not being here myself, so I defied the doctors. Mannering here?" "Bristow" grunted again as he got out of the car and rested his "injured" foot on the pavement. "Damned ankle. Is he?"

"No, the shop's empty."

"He wasn't at his flat, either. I've brought Larraby along, if he has any sense he'll open everything up for us. Will you, Larraby?"

"Mr. Mannering——"

"Mannering's not here," said Mannering abruptly. "If there's nothing in the place which shouldn't be, he's nothing to worry about. If he has stolen goods on the premises and you don't help us, we shall be pretty sure that you're involved. Are you going to open the shop?"

"I suppose I shall have to," said Larraby bitterly, "but I hope you'll make it clear to Mr. Mannering that I was subjected to considerable pressure."

"We will. Gordy——"

"Bill, there's one thing you don't know," said Gordon. "We had a tip that a buyer is coming here or at the flat with Mannering, before midnight—probably here. That's why I've waited so long."

"Yes," grunted Mannering, "they told me that at the Yard. I had a tip, too that a delivery of a suit of mail, just before the shop closed, was the one we ought to be interested in. Supposing I go in with Larraby and get the place opened up, while you wait out here in case Mannering and the other chap turn up."

"Right." Gordon seemed pleased. "When you turned into the street, I thought you were the very man I was waiting for!"

"Sorry to disappoint you!" Mannering turned away. "Well, Larraby. You've got one of the keys for the front door, and I've brought the other from Mannering's flat. Let's get a move on."

"If Mr. Mannering sues the police for forcing entry without first asking him to admit you, don't blame me," Larraby said.

"I won't blame you," Mannering assured him.

. . . . . .

In two minutes they were inside the shop, and the door was closed but not locked. Gordon and the other police vanished into shadowy doorways. The hired car stood there with the driver at the wheel, an innocent spectator, sensing

the excitement and sharing in it, but completely at a loss.

Larraby said: "Can we do it in time, sir?"

"I've been adding two and two," said Mannering in a low-pitched voice. "I don't believe that anyone has been able to break into Quinns, and I'm sure no one's used our keys. Anything short of believing that means that I suspect one of the staff; and I don't. So if no one was able to plant the rest of the Midis here, the probability is that they're inside the box, with Gill's body. There's certainly a note that damns me."

"Of *course*," breathed Larraby.

"We'll open the box and make sure," went on Mannering. "If the jewels are there, I'll pocket them. That will leave the little problem of the body."

Larraby almost choked.

"But I think I can see how we can handle the body," Mannering went on. "It'll be taking a chance, but if we don't take it we'll be sunk. Gordon's thorough, and if I just tell him the box is empty, or I've searched it, he'll have it checked, like a good policeman."

"Then how——?"

"Go ahead and start opening the box," said Mannering. "Is it just behind the partition, by the office?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Don't forget I have to limp," Mannering said.

Larraby hurried ahead. Two lights were on, but neither was bright, and the police could not see much from the windows. Larraby disappeared, and put on another light.

"Open my office," Mannering called out, "that'll look as if you really mean to do what you're told."

Larraby appeared again, and opened the office door, putting on the light so that anyone watching could see what he had done. He came out again as Mannering reached him. Just behind the screen which hid the assistants' desks from

the shop itself, lay the box which looked like a coffin. It was fastened with a metal clip, but not locked, and it took Mannering and Larraby only a minute to push the lid back.

There was the chain mail, lying on top of Max Gill's body.

By the body, near the neck, were the rest of the Midi diamonds, and a note signed "Marion Snow" which seemed to tell the world that she was terrified of "Mr. Mannering" and swore that she wouldn't tell the police he had been at the shop at the time of the murder.

23

BRISTOW

"All right," said Mannering softly, "we'll move the mail out, and put that in a corner. I'll keep the jewels. Then we'll put the lid back—but wait a minute, how long have we got?"

"About twenty minutes."

"Twenty," echoed Mannering, and stared at the pale face of the dead man, obviously hardly realising what it was. "Josh, do you remember that iron-bound box that the Egyptian tunics and regalia came in -one about this size?"

"Yes."

"Remember that we couldn't find the key, and had to get a locksmith in to open the lock? I don't say I couldn't have done it," Mannering added with a taut grin, "but it would have meant damaging the box as well as telling the youngsters that I've forced locks before. If we put the body in that box and lock it again and lose the key——"

Larraby caught his breath.

"I could tell Gordon that I thought we ought to take it with us to the Yard," said Mannering, and his voice was almost inaudible. "The hired car outside has a big boot. We wouldn't be able to get the box in, but could tie it on the back. I could go ahead, as Gordon would think, and ——"

Larraby moistened his lips.

"It's the one way in which we might get the body out of Quinns," he agreed tensely. "I can tell Gordon that we've lost the key. We'd better go and get the Egyptian box down first, sir, I can just about manage it, and you'd better not be seen moving about too much with that foot of yours."

"You couldn't be more right," said Mannering. "I'll get the mail out."

He began to work.

He wondered, almost for the first time, what Bill Bristow would do if he could see what was happening at this moment. Then he found himself wondering what Bristow was doing? Lying in bed, probably, and cursing his luck.

. . . . .

In fact, Bristow was getting dressed.

He was doing that with his wife's help and in spite of her protests. She was a small, pleasant-faced woman, quite used to her husband being out at all hours, and used to the fact that he put the Yard before his home. She told him that if he made his ankle far worse he had only himself to blame, and bent down to put a carpet slipper over the foot which stuck out of the swathes of bandages.

"I know, I know," said Bristow, almost impatiently, "but I don't like it, May."

"You're always on edge if Mannering's involved," said his wife, "it's like an illness."

"He's like a plague," said Bristow, wryly. "May, I don't believe that my fall was an accident, I think I was deliberately pushed. I may be wrong, but I've been lying there thinking about it, and I can remember being shoved. I was lucky not to get much more badly hurt."

"Even if you were, you're in no fit state to walk on that foot!"

"I know, but who did it? Mannering? I can't see Mannering trying to injure me, unless he's really desperate. If I was deliberately pushed, it was an attempt to make sure that I wasn't in on these raids tonight. I tell you I don't like it, and I'm going to see what it's about."

"If you'd just telephone the Yard, or even get a message to Gordon——"

"I want to go myself," said Bristow, and his wife knew

that there was nothing she could say in the face of his dogged determination. If his ankle was excruciating, he would still be at the scene of the raid when it took place. "Call the Yard for a car, don't tell 'em anything else."

. . . . .

That was at a quarter to twelve.

. . . . .

Larraby had pushed the office door to, so that there was little light at the end of the shop, and even if Gordon or his men were close to the window, they couldn't see when he brought the Egyptian case down the stairs. By then, Mannering had the other box empty except for Gill's body. Between them, they lifted this and placed it in the Egyptian box; there was good room. Then they fastened the lid, and locked it; and Larraby handed Mannering the heavy brass key.

"What's the time?" Mannering asked, as he pocketed it.

"Five to twelve."

"Near enough time to move," said Mannering. "I'm going to hobble along, and tell Gordon to send in for the box. I'll tell him you say the new key didn't come, and "

He didn't finish.

Gordon and other Yard men were converging on the door as he approached, and he opened it as Gordon stepped nearer. Nothing in Gordon's manner suggested that he was suspicious.

"Haven't been able to get anything out of Larraby, but everything's opened up, strong room as well," said Mannering. "Have our chaps make a job of it, Gordy. And send a couple to bring that big box along—they say it was delivered without the key, but I have my doubts. Lock's like a strong-room door, I think we'd be wiser to get it to the Yard and open it, than get a locksmith here. Unusual job, probably take him an age to fix."

"Right," said Gordon, and detailed two men, who went hurrying. "Are you going to stay and superintend——"

He broke off, trying not to show how much he hoped to be left alone.

"I'll go back to the Yard with the box," Mannering said. "This ankle's giving me hell."

"Sorry about that, Bill."

"It'll pass. Make a job of it, mind you, I don't want Mannering to squeeze out of this, like he's squeezed out of other jobs."

"I don't think he'll slip through our fingers this time," said Gordon, very softly.

His men were carrying the box quite easily. Another was standing with the Wolseley's driver, opening the boot of the car, which, when down, was quite large enough to hold the box. Mannering could only stand and watch, his heart thumping so painfully that there were moments when he thought that it would be impossible to keep the sound from the others. In New Bond Street two cars started off.

The box was loaded.

It was strapped on securely.

By then, Mannering was in the Wolseley, sitting behind the driver. Larraby had been allowed to come up, but Gordon and his men were already inside Quinns.

"Give Mr. Gordon all the help you can, Larraby," said Mannering, "don't try to pull any fast ones."

"I've already lodged my strongest protest, sir," said Larraby, with great dignity, "and I shall carry out your orders, still under protest."

Mannering grunted.

The driver started off.

They reached the end of the street, and turned right, towards the spot where Ryall was sitting and waiting, and as they did so another police car appeared, slowing down to

wait for them before it took the turning, and in the light of a street-lamp, Mannering recognised Bristow.

. . . . . .

In a few minutes, the hunt would be up.

. . . . . .

There was Jim Ryall, standing outside the café. There was the Yard car, still in the road; the engine had stalled, and Mannering had a few seconds' respite.

He said: "Stop a moment."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks," said Mannering. "Go back to the place we just left, will you, and tell anyone you see outside to make a special point of searching the roof."

"Very good, sir." The man went off, and as he did so, Ryall came up. When the driver had turned the corner, Ryall scrambled into the car.

"Fine," said Mannering. "We've got ten minutes' start at least. Get moving, I'll direct you."

. . . . . .

There would be a lot of confusion at first, Mannering persuaded himself; he might have more time than he thought. The men outside Quinns would recognise Bristow and be puzzled, but there had been time for him to change cars. They probably wouldn't raise the alarm until he was limping inside—and even when Gordon first saw him, Gordon would surely think that he had changed his mind, it wouldn't occur to them at first that there were two Bristows.

He needed minutes, before the radio messages were being flashed all over London.

Ryall seemed born to the wheel. He sped towards West Kensington, and although policemen stood and stared after the car, no one attempted to stop them. Mannering couldn't be sure that anyone took the number, but the description of the car would be enough, once the alarm was raised.

"Think we have a chance?" Ryall asked at last.

"Yes, I do. Jim, listen. The moment we stop, we both get out and open that box while it's on the car. You know what's in it. We're going to take the body into the house where Daniels is lying dead now. We'll dump it -I've a key. I've already burned all the papers that might do me any harm. We'll release two prisoners there -if the police find them, they'll talk, but if I give them a chance to escape they'll probably lie low. One's planning to get out of the country, anyhow. Once we're away, I'll park the car—but you're to make your own way from Lee Walk. Telephone or call the flat later, I'll get there as soon as I can. Right?"

"Right." Ryall spoke calmly and with a confidence which he seemed to have lacked earlier.

Soon, they were in Lee Walk.

. . . . .

"*This is a message for all cars in the central London area,*" the Information Room at Scotland Yard flashed, as the car pulled up outside Number 30. "*A man in a black Wolseley 1946 model, is wanted for questioning. There is a large box on the back, protected with iron rings. The box may contain important evidence against the two men. Stop the car and hold the man at all costs.*

"*This is a message . . .*"

. . . . .

"Got it?" Mannering asked.

"Yes," said Ryall.

"I'll open the door." There was a moment's pause, while Ryall supported the grisly burden, and Mannering opened the front door of Number 30, Lee Walk.

"Right," said Mannering. "Now off you go."

"But I want——"

"Hurry," Mannering said. "And telephone the flat."

He lugged the body into the hall and rested it by the side of Doc Daniels, and as he did so he heard Ryall hurrying along the street. Ryall would be all right, he'd a lot of

quality. He would need briefing about what to say when the police started questioning him next day.

But Mannering could hide the diamonds, and the body couldn't be traced to him.

The police could think what they liked, could believe what they liked, but they'd no definite evidence.

The pressure should be off before they could start questioning Della, and Della knew nothing about the murder; it would be news to her that her brother was dead.

Mannering needed only minutes, now. He hurried downstairs, opened the cellar and slashed the prisoners' bonds.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll get out and lie low," he said. "I'd rather see you in jail, but if you keep quiet then so will I."

He left them, and went upstairs.

He pulled off the "Bristow" moustache and took off his hat, as he hurried out, leaving the house of death. In the morning an anonymous phone call would tip the police off about them. He drove the hired car along several narrow streets until he came to a parking place where several cars were standing, and he pulled into this, switched off the lights, and got out. He was turning the corner when he saw a police car—and as he stood in the shadows until it passed, he saw it slow down opposite the car that he'd just left.

Then he hurried on, hoping for a night taxi to take him to Victoria, the lock-up garage, the make-up box and materials to take off this make-up.

Bristow would know exactly what had happened; so would Gordon. But they would never be able to prove it.

. . . . .

It was morning when he told Della all that had happened; morning when she said very simply that nothing would make her talk to the police, she owed Mannering far too much.

. . . . .

Three months later she and Jim Ryall were married at a registry office, with Mannering as one and Larraby as the other witness, and with Lorna Mannering, back from Paris, attending Della. Della looked quite lovely, Ryall was as elated as a man could be.

The police had failed to make Della talk.

Mason and the others from Lee Walk had somehow got both bodies out of the house, and they hadn't yet been found. All police inquiries had come to a dead end; but Bristow would have guessed a lot, especially when a packet containing the Midi diamonds had been received at his office, with no trace of the sender.

Mannering learned more about Bristow, too, from Chittering.

"No doubt what happened, John. Bristow scented that you were being framed, and had you watched openly so that you could see what was happening. That way, you had a chance. Can you think of any other reason?"

"No," Mannering agreed softly. "I don't think I can."

"That'll be it," said Chittering. "Take it from me."

. . . . .

"If you hadn't had Mannering's places watched so openly, I think we'd had got him," Gordon complained to Bristow. "What got into you, Bill?"

"If you don't make a hash of a job sooner or later, you'll be a better man than I," Bristow said. "The truth is I believed Mannering was being framed from the beginning. There was his prints on too many stolen things—we had to consider him, but Mannering wouldn't be so careless. Those stolen articles had been taken to Mannering for valuation, that's how he came to handle them. Don't worry so much about Mannering, we've plenty of other people on our minds."

THE END

Suspect No. 1 - John Mannering

A knock on Della Gill's door in the early hours reveals her brother Max, reeling from knife wounds. He confesses to being a party to a jewellry raid and to being stabbed while attempting to stop the murder of the shop owner. On the run from the rest of the gang, Max begs Della not to go to the police, but she takes into her confidence John Mannering, alias the Baron, who has been assigned to the case.

The Baron sees Max as bait and agrees to protect him, sensing that the case is linked with the recent disappearance of the priceless Midi diamonds. But then the branch he was standing on snapped, as Max's luck finally runs out – and why were the police suddenly watching *his* house?

'The Baron's career is a crescendo of

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